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Visit of the Blenheim

by Conon Fraser

THE bright reflected light danced across Jim Harvey's firm, suntanned face. "How long did you say you'd been at sea, David?"

"Two years next month," answered David Carling, pulling at his jib sheet and taking a quick turn round the cleat as the Harveys' yacht keeled to the breeze.

"I dare say in two years you have seen a good bit of the world?" asked Jim's wife, Diana.

"Yes, I suppose I have." David glanced towards the trim bungalows among the dark green trees on the nearby headland, which still hid the town and the docks; seeing the dull red flowering of the crimson Christmas trees along the coast, he

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remembered sailing like this on a shore leave of a year ago, and gazing across at the purple sprawl of bougainvillaea on houses in Manila. From Manila, his thoughts went on to other harbours: to Singapore, Hong Kong, Yokohama, Sydney . . . And recalling the question, he nodded and said, "Yes. It's a good Line."

He paused for a moment. "Of course, you get a bit homesick at times. I think my parents miss me quite a bit. And I've a girlfriend at home. Jenny." He was annoyed to feel the colour flush to his cheeks. "I—I often wish I could see her, too, but it doesn't last for long. Thank goodness, there's always plenty to be done on a ship. We can take up to a dozen passengers, you know, and you'd be amazed how many of them think life at sea's monotonous. I dare say it is, for some of them. But never for us, or never for long. Still, I've been lucky, and I've always had good ships."

Mrs. Harvey had listened to him, with her pale blue eyes on his face. She turned away with a faint smile as he finished. He's very young, she thought.

The town and harbour were now in full view, and they could see David's ship the *Blenheim Rose* and the three other boats, two of them loading radiata pine, which lay alongside the quay. It gave David a sense of freedom, to see the ship at such a distance across the water.

After several minutes Jim Harvey warned, "Ready to go about," and David freed the jib sheet from its cleat as the yacht swung round and the boom went over with a thud. Diana Harvey leaned forward to pull in her rope as they went on to the port tack, and for a moment David caught a glimpse of white lace and the smooth curve of her breast against the blue of her shirt and the brown warmth of her arm. He looked up quickly to watch the sail fill and harden against the sky; then let his sheet go slack and leaned back as the shore steadied from its reeling circuit and they began the last tack before the long reach back to the Club House. He could feel his heart beating, filled with a strange unwelcome disquiet; and he watched the sunlight sparkling on the water near them, liquid light on clear wavelets, cool and free.

He reflected that he'd been lucky to get in with the Harveys. They were damned nice people, both of them, the sort of people a chap could feel at home with at once. They had nice kids, as well: a boy of about ten, called Gavin, and a girl of eleven or twelve, Ann: and the whole family gave him the impression of vigour and a frank enjoyment of life.

In fact, it looked as if this place was going to prove Brian

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Phipps' theory that the smaller the port, the bigger the welcome. It had certainly started well, for within less than an hour of tying up yesterday morning, the Commodore of the Yacht Club had come aboard to invite the officers of the *Blenheim* to join the Club as full members, and take part in the weekend celebrations for its silver jubilee.

For the rest of the day until dusk they had been busy loading cargo into the refrigerated holds, and he had been on watch that evening. But Brian and a couple of others had gone along to the Club, and come back fairly tight and loudly enthusiastic. His turn had come at about eleven this morning, when Jim Harvey had come on board with Gavin and Ann, and taken him back to their home at Kaharoa. Diana Harvey, tall and self-assured, had at once made him feel at his ease; and a large sherry on their broad verandah, looking down a long slope of native bush and gardens to the red of the pohutakawas and the blue of the sea fading to distance, had spread a haze of wellbeing across his senses.

Not once had a thought of Jenny crossed his mind. Not once had he thought of her with that sudden catch of weakness and longing, which could come so unexpectedly: a longing for her to be sharing what he was doing. And now, with genuine astonishment, he realised that he hadn't spoken about her or remembered her, until a short while ago.

Until now, as he answered their questions. And, in spite of himself, he felt the colour flush to his cheeks again as if he were a boy, as he thought of his own inadequate, ineffectual advances, and the shameful fact he'd never really told Jenny what he felt about her. Damnable, how she could make him feel so tongue-tied and uncertain—hesitant to take and hold her, for fear she would tear herself away. He'd never tried, as he should have done, and he found his own weakness as frustrating as her maddeningly ingenuous letters, which frequently made him wonder whether, beneath her sweet and reserved affection, she really was without a spark of the anguish he knew in love.

A warning hail of "Ready to go about," from Harvey broke into his thoughts, and he hauled his rope in quickly hand over hand as they gybed. The sail slackened and the boom thudded across. For a few seconds the canvas flapped and then came taut as he braced himself and pulled it to a closer haul.

Jim Harvey held them steady on their new course. "D'you feel you've got the hang of her, David?"

"Yes. She handles beautifully."

"Good. Then we're all set for tomorrow. If this breeze holds, we should get some good racing. . . "

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The following morning David was busy on the *Blenheim.* But at ten past twelve Harvey met him with the children, and took him through the town and out past suburban homes and gardens full of brilliant colour to Kaharoa, with its almost tropical setting of deep green bush relieved by the parched green of lawns, the red, green, and grey of house roofs, and the broad leaves of tree fern and nikau palm below them. They ate indoors because of the wind, which blew from a cloudless sky; but the french doors were wide open to the view. After the meal, they went straight down to the Yacht Club.

The race was due to start at two, and in the half hour before it, helped by the children, they fitted the sails, secured the battens, checked shrouds and halyards, and then, running the mainsail to the top of the mast, left their moorings and joined the other competitors, manœuvring like seagulls in the crowded basin as they watched for the flag signals from the Committee boat, which would tell them how long they had left before their class could cross the starting-line.

And then they were away: a close group of seven long smooth hulls, and tapered, leaning masts carrying broad filled canvas. The cries of the children and the other spectators were already behind them as they swooped across the line in third place.

The course was complicated, crossing and recrossing itself on reaches marked by the buoys of the deep-sea channel into the harbour. And the wind was strong, coming in gusts across the choppy surface, to set them heeling over with their lee rail close to the waves. But as David had already suspected, Jim Harvey's judgment was perfect—there was no doubt he could sail; and Diana Harvey and David braced themselves against the side, leaning well out and revelling in the vibrant shudder of the sea hitting the bows, and in the fine spray which came whipping back in salty drifts against their faces. David was glad of his sweater, for all the warmth of the sun. And he thought, By jove, this is the life!

By the fifth buoy, they had overtaken Brian Phipps with a greyhaired man and a redheaded girl in *Can-Can,* and beaten *Jakkleen* at a turn to take the lead. And then, without warning and with a tremendous crack, their mast broke. They ducked as its top, the gaff, and the sail came down upon them in a shambles.

"Damn it!" Jim Harvey scrambled forward. "Are you all right, Di?"

With his help, Diana struggled free of the tangle of canvas and ropes.

"Just. Thank goodness nothing solid hit me, darling."

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" Well, that puts us out of the race," said her husband resignedly. They were lying beam on to the sea, and water was swilling at their feet. *Jakkleen* and *Can-Can* had already passed them unnoticed, and now, in a close group, came *Eros*, *Nefertiti*, and *Challenger*.

" Which only leaves Frank Wynter in *Mako*," calculated Harvey, with a quick glance past his wife. " And as usual, he's out of the running. Wait a bit, Di—it looks as if he's turning to help us."

In a moment, there was no longer any doubt.

" He is," said David.

" Damned good of him," said Jim Harvey. " The man's an ass, but you can't help liking him."

Mako came within easy hailing distance and began to circle them like an indecisive moth round a lamp, drawing closer on each circuit.

" Throw a line! " shouted Jim in exasperation.

A boy of seventeen or so crawled along to *Mako*'s bows and hurled a rope as she sliced past, going with the wind and not against it. David caught it, whipped it round a cleat, and then saw that *Mako* was travelling much too fast. But before he had time to free it the line had whipped taut and jerked the boy off his feet and into the sea.

" For goodness' sake, man, what *are* you doing? " roared Harvey as Frank Wynter looked back, and the boy started to swim towards them. Diana began to laugh, and to David it seemed as if an irrepressible exuberance was welling within her, as she struggled to control herself. He watched her, with half an eye on Jim, fascinated. If Jim hadn't been so angry, David felt sure she'd have really let herself go.

She leaned towards him, her hair dishevelled, her loose sweater moving across the firm contour and the lift of her breasts, and David had a sudden image of Jenny—of Jenny, always so coolly unaware like this of her physical beauty, of her taut breasts, of the smooth, clean line of her legs . . .

" Come on, David, we'd better pull in that line before the wretched boy gets rammed."

Frank Wynter had flung his boat about and was coming in more slowly now, against the wind. As they pulled his crew to safety the two boats touched and grated against each other with an ugly splintering of wood. The boy leapt across as they yawed, and grabbed for *Mako*'s mast. Jim Harvey shouted, " For heaven's sake, keep clear and leave it to me, before you do any more damage! "

" Think you can manage? " asked Wynter with concern.

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"We'll get home on our own, Frank."

"I'll ask them to send out help, then," called *Mako*'s owner with a wave of his hand, as his sails filled and he began to turn away.

Diana said, "I'm sorry, Jim, I couldn't help laughing."

"I'm afraid I was too busy thinking of the boat. The man's a clot. He doesn't even know the rudiments of sailing."

Now they were on their own, they could take stock. The mainsail was wrecked, but the jib was usable, and soon they had a makeshift jury-rig hoisted aloft and drawing to the wind, and were on the slow, crippled haul back to the finish at the Yacht Club. And in David's mind, now the confusion was over, there remained his disquieting memory of Jenny, and the more immediate impact of Diana Harvey's almost sensuous delight, which would not leave him.

From shandies on the verandah, overlooking the slipway and the boat pool, they returned to the Harveys' home for a late tea before the Club dance that evening. After it, David was shown along to the spare room, where the case he had brought earlier from the *Blenheim* was lying on the bed. Since the race the wind had fallen and the air was almost oppressive, although the windows were wide open.

As he showered and changed into a shirt and the suit which had been made for him only a few weeks before by a Chinese tailor in Singapore, he noticed things about the room: its large windows, which gave it a pleasant spaciousness; the almost imperceptibly patterned wallpaper; a Van Gogh, *Harvest in Provence*, full of yellow light and space; a Cézanne; Iris Murdoch's latest novel; and a handpainted ashtray, artistic but not quite perfect. As he put it down, he wondered if Diana had made it. It was the sort of thing she'd be bound to be good at. And then he realised that he was interested in this room only because of Diana Harvey.

With a conscious effort he thought of Jenny. If only Jenny were here this evening, he knew she'd understand. Everything was right, and he was convinced he'd have the courage to tell her what he felt about her, without faltering like an idiot.

And yet, did he love her? Why did other thoughts and other stimuli disturb him so? Or was it just the pain of separation and longing? And how did you know, at first, precisely what love was? Where did you draw the line between need and love? He only knew that this evening, as on countless other occasions, the least thought of Jenny filled him with an aching depth of yearning. At times like this, he would almost wish he had never

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met her; then there'd have been no emptiness. Yet what good would that have done? It was being apart that was the torment.

With a sigh, he left the room and went along the passage, to find Jim Harvey on the terrace.

"Have a drink?"

"Thanks," said David. He felt better, with the tumbler of whisky and soda firmly held in his hand. Yes, much better to live for the moment.

Diana Harvey joined them later; she was wearing a deep blue cocktail dress which made the pale blue of her eyes all the more striking. They said good night—and good-bye for David's part—to the children, and then left for the Yacht Club, sitting three abreast, and cruising quietly down the broad, winding road as the afternoon turned towards the dusk of evening.

The Club lounge was long and narrow, with a bar at one end, broad leather-covered benches on two sides, and open french windows along the seaward side overlooking the boat pool and the jetty. Yachting pennants were fixed to the walls, and the ceiling light was a chandelier made out of a ship's wheel. The place was already full of men and women talking and drinking. Captain Orman of the *Blenheim* and the Commodore were in dinner-jackets, but as far as David could see they were the only two. Several others had taken off their jackets and were in shirtsleeves. David took a glass of some drink with a bit of peel floating in it, Pimm's, or some sort of cup, and while the Harveys were greeting some friends, drank it, and helped himself to another. He found he was standing next to Brian Phipps and Ron, the First Officer.

"You're a lucky devil, David," said Brian, who had removed his jacket. "I wouldn't have minded landing the Harveys myself."

The First agreed with Brian. "Yes, she's the pick of the bunch. A real beaut, as they'd say in this far-flung limb of Empire. In fact, to be quite frank, old boy, positively Junoesque." In the wardroom of the *Blenheim* he might have said more.

"How right you are, Ron!" said Brian. He took David by the elbow and steered him along towards the bar, past people laughing and talking, until they reached the redheaded girl who had been in *Can-Can* with him. "Sue, here's the chap you've been longing to meet. In the very flesh. Although he looks a mere lad, he's the menace of all ports east and west of the International Date Line—David Carling."

"What are you drinking?" asked David, inwardly cursing as Brian slipped away with an apologetic murmur and left them to it.

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"Lime juice. I'd love another. It's so dreadfully hot in here."

"Yes." David got hold of one for her, and helped himself to another Pimm's to fortify the drinks he had already had. Well, if Brian had pulled a fast one on him, he might as well make the best of it. And this girl wasn't bad. Already, he could sense a mellowing to the laughter and voices round him. Music had started, and the night was warm outside. It looked like being a good evening and, after all, the night was still young.

He handed Sue her drink. People were dancing. Diana Harvey had kicked off her shoes and had been the first on the floor with Jim, who had slung his coat over the bracket of the starboard light at the end of the bar. Even in her stockinged feet she was tall and graceful, and there was something in the way she danced and looked at her husband which made you feel she hadn't a care for anyone else in the room.

Abruptly, David finished his Pimm's. He turned to Sue. Apart from her freckles and her auburn hair, she reminded him vaguely of Jenny. Perhaps it was her age. Her figure was good. He was aware of the same careful detachment in her as they moved on to the floor. Yes, she was incredibly like the girls he'd danced with two and three years ago when he was still a cadet, at local hops held at friends' houses during his leaves at home. The sort of girl who would have been better company for a drink or two. But at least she was lively, and that was something. And she had a superb sense of rhythm.

David noticed Captain Orman dancing with Diana. And then, later on, Brian and the First Officer more or less taking it in turns. Jim Harvey, having left her to them with easygoing good humour, was in a corner by the bar with the Commodore and old Leyland from the *Blenheim*, the three of them deep in conversation. With Leyland there, it was either sailing or sex. It couldn't be anything else.

In an effort to move on from Sue, David took her along to join a young couple who turned out to be the crew of *Eros*, which had overtaken both *Can-Can* and *Jakkleen* to win the race that afternoon. Sue was taken from them by a tall, broad-shouldered youth as the dancing started again, and David, turning to look for the Harveys, found himself face to face with a short, roundfaced young woman with glasses and an anxious expression.

"How do you like it here?"

"It's a splendid harbour for sailing in."

"I suppose you find us most terribly provincial?"

"I hadn't noticed it," confessed David, looking past and

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catching Diana Harvey's eye. He smiled, a little ruefully. She was standing with Jim, and he made a tentative effort to move past and join them. But all he achieved was to jostle closer to this primary school teacher, whose name was Marion, or Miriam —he couldn't remember which.

She stared up at him. "I think we're most terribly aware of it."

"Aware of what?"

"Aware of being provincial," she said irritably. "I mean, we've no depth. No depth of tradition, no depth of culture. You must have felt it?"

"No honestly, I can't say—we haven't been here long, you know." To his dismay, he saw that Captain Orman had joined Jim and Diana Harvey, as the first people began to move through to another room for the buffet supper. His hopes of going in with them were lost.

David tried to concentrate on Marion, but his mind was confused and he knew he couldn't get interested in her argument anyway. He wished now he'd stayed with Sue.

By the time the meal was over and they were back in the long lounge, he knew that nothing was right any longer. His companion was obviously bored with him, and for some time had been doing most of her talking to another woman. He stood there, overcome with the loneliness which could fill him as much at a time like this as during a watch at sea.

He moved away unnoticed and helped himself to another drink. He knew he must be pretty tight, but what did it matter? Someone had turned out the lights of the ship's wheel chandelier, and now the room was softly lit by two small lights on the wall at one end and the port and starboard lights of the bar at the other. He looked down at his glass and thought, Oh God. Jenny, if only you were here! Oh Jenny, Jenny. *Damn* it!

He knew he had only an hour left before he was due to go, if he was to be back on the *Blenheim Rose* in time for the twelve to four watch. At least in port it was nothing more than a formality, and the Captain and old Leyland would not be back until the small hours of the morning.

He finished his drink, had another, and a few dances later left the room. On the way back, he stopped to look at a panel just inside the door, in which were set the dials of a wind-bearing indicator, an aneroid barometer, and an anemometer for measuring the force of the wind. He was thinking it was a splendid idea, and he would have to get one for himself some day, when someone tapped him on the shoulder, and Diana Harvey

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said, " Come on, David, we haven't danced all the evening."

He said nothing as they moved on to the crowded floor, but the aching inside him was bittersweet as their bodies touched and he felt her cheek cool and pleasant against his own.

After the first few steps they closed and danced without space between them; and in every turn and step and gliding movement they seemed to blend without effort, although he'd never been a particularly skilful dancer. The fragrance of her hair and her closeness were mingled in the very air that he breathed. He could feel her long, lithe limbs sliding warm against his own, could feel the subtle, unhurried pliancy and the flexing of her legs through the silk of her dress; and for a moment their closeness genuinely frightened him. He tried to move apart, but the soft lighting in the crowded room made it seem a move of panic doomed to failure anyway. She was humming softly to herself the tune they were dancing to. She didn't mind. And so he let himself press against her, no longer caring if she felt his urgency, until his senses filled beyond the sharpness of desire with the broader sensuality of the contiguity of their legs and bodies, and the steady firmness of her breasts against him.

He wished it could have gone on for ever. But at last the music stopped, and with reluctance he let her draw away, so that she could look into his eyes and read his face.

" I know what you're feeling, David, and I know what it's like. You miss her a lot, don't you? "

For a moment he was startled. And then he said frankly, " Yes. Sometimes—well, honestly, it's hell. And yet I know I'm being a damned fool about it. I wish I could just forget about her sometimes."

" If you knew she cared for you as much as you care for her, it'd make all the difference, wouldn't it, David? "

He shook his head. " I just don't know."

" But I do. It's no good being hesitant. In this sort of thing, you can trust a woman's intuition."

This was ghastly. He knew he was making an awful fool of himself. He looked quickly at the clock above the bar; and, noticing his glance, she said, " Don't worry. Jim won't have forgotten. We'll run you back to the ship."

" Thanks. I say, Diana—will you—? "

" Of course." She laughed as they moved close together. " After all, nobody's come to take me from you. Not even my husband."

He tried to think of something humorous to say in reply but couldn't, and gradually he felt the tension growing between

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them. They had reached the corner of the lounge, and suddenly, as if on an impulse, she steered them towards the french doors.

"Let's go outside for a moment, David. It's much too hot in there."

They stepped on to the verandah, and he stumbled and took a deep breath of the night air before walking after her to where it was dark and still. His heart was racing, harder and faster than at any time in the crowded room, and when she stopped to turn towards him, he stammered, "Diana, I—I—"

"There's no need to try to explain. I know, David. That's why we're here."

He took her and kissed her; felt her lips firm, not like a girl's—and then his mouth was hard upon hers, twisted into urgency, and his tongue was finding sweetness and desire, until there was nothing else in his awareness that mattered; until gently, she put her hands to his arms and drew her face away.

"No, David. No, like this—" Lifting a hand to the side of his face, she kissed him, in her turn; and he felt the softness of her lips encircle his own, sensual yet strangely free of passion, and stilling him with an unexpected quality of inward peace.

When she moved away, her voice was unsteady for the first time. "That's how I meant it to be, David." She paused. "I think you'd better go through to the hall now and I'll get hold of Jim. It's time we were going."

He went in through the door which was just beside him, an overwhelming weakness spreading through him, and waited for them in the hall. The weakness slowly turned into a dull ache, as if he had just been winded.

Five minutes later they were in the car, and turning on to the road for the town and the docks.

They stopped alongside the *Blenheim*, and David got out, took his case from the back seat, and slammed the door. The night air was clear and still, and he felt it was late. He bent forward, looking in through the window.

"You've given me a wonderful time. In fact, it's been—well, it's been one of the best shore leaves I've ever had."

"That's all right, old man. It was a good weekend. We thoroughly enjoyed it," said Jim Harvey.

Diana looked up at him. "And about that girl of yours. Tell her you love her, and make no bones about it."

"I will," he promised. Goodness, but he was weary. "And many thanks. I certainly will."

He waited until the car had gone, and then began to walk towards the ship, tall and very young and not entirely steady.

As they turned away and the scene swung past in the rear

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mirror and was gone, Jim said thoughtfully, " You made a great hit with that young fellow."

Diana smiled. " I suppose I did. I could scarcely help it. Poor boy, he was terribly homesick for that girl of his in England."

" If you ask me, it's just as well he'll be in Suva in four days' time."

" Oh really, Jim! "

" No, Di, I mean it. You're damned attractive still."

She smiled across at him. " But there's only one person who really matters, Jim."

" I know. It's these other poor devils I worry about! "

She laughed. She knew they were in sympathy, could feel it strong between them. And she said quietly, " Jim."

He dipped his lights for a passing car. " You don't want to go back? "

" No, darling."

They drove on in silence, until they reached the place where the coast road and the road to Kaharoa divided. With his indicator winking on the dashboard, he turned them up the hill away from the coast.

He put the car away while Diana saw to the children, and then they went to their room, and to bed.

For long moments they lay quite still, looking into each other's faces.

" You always were generous, Di."

" I don't suppose I helped him all that much. He was a nice boy."

" Mm." Jim reached up to switch off the light, leaving them in the deep gloaming of the night. And now their hands touched and moved on; and she drew a deep breath as they slid close and she held him—felt no more the slim uncertain body of the boy, but the reassuring strength of the man she loved. And she was startled by the force of her feeling, spreading till it filled her body, now sweeping and intense, so that she cried aloud; and when it was over, she lay there, aware of nothing but the calm ocean which comes after fulfilment, at peace and at one with him, in the dark, strange sea of the night.

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★ *Marlborough, Sandhurst, three years as a subaltern with the Royal Artillery in Hong Kong, Conon Fraser was set for a military career. Instead, he resigned his commission to live in New Zealand, write a Life of Captain Cook, eight adventure books for his four small sons, and this, his first Argosy story.*

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The Knight and the Dragon

Once upon a time in a Far Country a Knight set out to find Adventure.

As he rode through the Wood he saw a Fiery Dragon guarding a Beautiful Maiden.

He fought the Dragon and rescued the Maiden . . .

By JEAN GRAMAN

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. . . took her to his Castle
and married her,

but soon afterwards he
discovered that she
was a Shrew.

So he put her on his Steed
again, took her to the Wood,
where the Dragon had
meanwhile recovered,

returned her,
and rode away.

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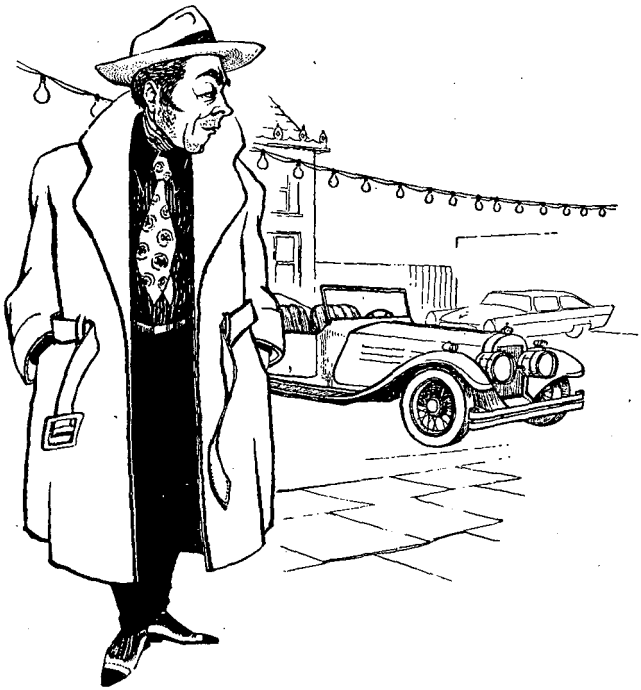

A SHADE ILLEGAL

by Robert Murphy

AT HIGH noon on Saturday, the twenty-sixth of May, the ghost of Mr. Carnetti materialised on the pavement in front of the suburban house of a young man named Geoffrey Thomas MacCue. Geoffrey was having his troubles that day, but Mr. Carnetti wasn't aware of it and wouldn't have cared anyhow, for he didn't know Geoffrey and had troubles of his own. He had been a gangster during his life, in an era when being a gangster was a violent, chancy and profitable affair; and although these lively days were long gone, he had left behind him a bit of unfinished business and couldn't bear to depart for good until he had taken care of it. His immaterial state had its advantages, but it also had its drawbacks; he needed a mortal

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to help him, and in innumerable materialisations, like this one, had been unable to find a mortal who suited his purpose and his fancy.

As his spirit took on the semblance of the gnomelike little man he had been, with the long, pale line of the scar down the left side of his face, Mr. Carnetti looked round rather gloomily. He had never liked suburbs, and now, somehow, he had got into one. He was sure that nothing good would come of such a dreary place and was about to move on, when Geoffrey came out of his back door, stared morosely at the burgeoning grass in his garden and went into his garage. To another suburbanite there would have been nothing unusual in this; suburbanites were always staring morosely at their lawns and going into their garages; but Mr. Carnetti was a foreigner in this milieu and saw nuances unobserved by the natives. He suddenly had a feeling that something was about to happen.

He waited, and presently Geoffrey emerged from the garage holding a newspaper and pushing his power lawnmower. He pushed the mower down to the end of the lawn where he burnt the rubbish, arranged the newspaper round it and lighted the paper with a match. When the paper was burning well, he walked back to the house and went in.

Mr. Carnetti watched with fascination while the mower caught fire, and he jumped when the petrol tank exploded. When the smoke blew away and the pieces stopped falling, Mr. Carnetti could see that what was left of the mower was burning splendidly, and he was sure that it would never cut any more grass. It had been a fine sight, reminding him rather nostalgically of the old days, and what had happened to the cars of his rivals when they made nuisances of themselves. It also excited him; for he was a man who loved gestures and had long been searching for a mortal who could make a satisfactory gesture to help him in a final one of his own.

Geoffrey's act delighted him; Geoffrey was his boy. He set about to move intangibly into Geoffrey's mind, to see what memories were in it and how best to exploit them. It would be a lot of work, but it would be worth it.

First he wanted to know what had brought Geoffrey to the burning of the mower, so he went back a little. He found Geoffrey lonely and dispirited because it was a fine Saturday morning and his wife Bette was at her mother's bedside two hundred miles away. The old lady was very ill and, although she had a small income of her own, it wasn't large enough to pay for the specialist's fees. Geoffrey was going to have to find the money for that. With this hanging over him, and not having Bette's

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companionship and conversation to distract and entertain him, he was feeling very lonesome; and although he had just had his breakfast, he had got the bottle out and had a drink. It had warmed him so well and generously that he had had another, and then he put the bottle away.

Geoffrey wandered for a while around the empty house, somewhat bemused by the pleasant sensation that his feet were just a little above the floor, and thought about doing a bit of work in the garden. He looked out of the window. Golden sunlight lay over everything, and the birds were industriously singing, but the grass was long. When Geoffrey saw this, he came down to earth again. Bette usually trimmed round the edges while he mowed, and he would miss her; besides, the mower was approaching its state of planned obsolescence, and he needed a new one which he hadn't the money to buy. He hadn't the money to buy anything. He was hocked to the ears, what with the mortgage and the payments on this and that and the other, the taxes and the insurance and the outstanding bills; and his account at the bank was earmarked, handcuffed, and, in a manner of speaking, in trust. And there were his mother-in-law's medical expenses.

It had been then that the spirit of revolt, the need to make a gesture of defiance against the encompassing gloom, took hold of him; it had been then that he had marched forth and burnt the mower. Now, as Geoffrey stood at the window watching the results of his handiwork, Mr. Carnetti went back further into Geoffrey's mind, into his youth, and discovered the Locomobile. It was exactly what he needed; and as he withdrew to arrange matters, he thoughtfully got the bottle out of the kitchen cabinet and left it on the draining-board, for he had learnt long ago that matters approaching unreality went more smoothly when lubricated with alcohol.

When the mower had finished burning, it seemed to Geoffrey that there was a whispering inside his head telling him that he would enjoy a walk. He got his hat and, as he went through the kitchen, he saw the bottle sitting there. This confused him, for he was sure that he had put it away. He paused and stared at it, then decided to have one for the road. He had it and, feeling lighter of foot again, went out of the house and down the street.

He had walked a little near home but had no favourite route to follow and, as his feet felt vaguely impelled in a certain direction, he let them take it. Presently he was in a neighbourhood that he didn't recognise; he was sure that he had never seen it

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before. The houses were larger, with old trees, and looked rather old-fashioned, higher than his own split-level and more ornate; some were decorated with wooden fretwork, and one or two had cupolas. Dappled with sun and shadow, they had an air of untroubled and spacious leisure and calm. They charmed him, reminding him of the neighbourhood he had lived in as a boy. He drifted slowly along, having a fine time and half expecting one of his long-departed uncles to appear and pat him on the head and give him money to buy sweets.

But no uncle showed up and, when he turned the corner, he was startled to see a small secondhand car site in front of him. It had a string of electric lights overhead, a small square house for the proprietor, and a minor complement of cars. Geoffrey didn't even see these, however, for sitting in the middle of them with a space on each side of it, huge and long and high, shining with brass and filling the eye, was a red Locomobile. He had forgotten that there was such a car, but he remembered it now.

He stopped, transfixed, and an ineffable joy took hold of him, for this was better than an uncle. It *was* an uncle, it was Uncle Adrian; Uncle Adrian with his eyes sparkling, and his great moustache blowing back in the wind, riding wildly on the great surge of power and daring them to try to catch him. Geoffrey remembered as though it were yesterday the wonderful rides through the park, with the Locomobile thundering along and the police whistles blowing and the several times, when the car was new, that arrogant taxi drivers tried to crowd Uncle Adrian and learnt their lesson. If a taxi attempted to push Uncle Adrian around, he grinned and pushed back; the Locomobile, having boiler-plate mudguards, emerged unwrinkled from these encounters while the taxis were left in rumpled disarray.

Recalling these delights, Geoffrey walked smiling up to the Locomobile and laid one hand on a mudguard. When he touched the metal, there was a sudden feeling born in him that he had come home after a long, hard and frustrating journey, and for a long moment he stood in a dreamlike quietness, savouring the feeling.

"You like it?" a voice said beside him and, looking around, he saw a little gnome of a man who was evidently the owner of the site. "You like it?" the gnome said again. "You are a fortunate man."

"My uncle had one," Geoffrey said, bemused.

"Ah," the gnome said. "This one belonged to a man named Carnetti. Quite a famous man."

"I used to ride in my uncle's when I was a boy."

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"It is too bad that this one was not your uncle's," the gnome said. "But it is the same. You can ride in it again." The little man gave him a charming, whimsical smile and cocked his head to one side. "Just think of what it would be like to have one of the best parts of your youth back again."

Geoffrey stared at him and suddenly, like stout Cortez upon a peak in Darien, was filled with a wild surmise. It would be wonderful to have it, even if he didn't use it very often. It shouldn't be used very often, for that matter; only when things got too much for him, when there were more bills and emergencies, when the committed bank balance grew even more inadequate than it was now and the state of the world, once so unthreatening and calm, took another lurching tack towards disaster and dissolution. It would be a retreat, temporary to be sure, but as refreshing as a holiday. It would be a safety-valve, for he would never come home from a ride in it and set fire to a lawnmower. "Ah," he said. "I'd love to have it, but it wouldn't be very practical for a man as poor as I am."

The little man smiled again, and Geoffrey saw for the first time that there was a long pale line of a scar down the left side of his face. "It is in wonderful condition. The gentleman who owned it for a time, after Mr. Carnetti, modernised it. It has an electrical system, a self-starter, and hydraulic brakes. It has a road book and a quite historical licence, which does not need renewing. There is nothing left to spend money on except the transfer of title."

Geoffrey looked longingly at the noble outline of the Locomobile and, enthralled by these inducements, which, indeed, he was almost convinced, made the car eminently practical, struggled woefully within himself. He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything except Bette; and as he thought of her, he could see in his mind's willing eye, the two of them roaring splendidly along with the top down, all cares forgotten. He put his hand on the car again, and a thrilling and delightful current ran up his arm. He let his hand rest on the metal for a long moment and recalled the bank balance and the bills and then took his hand sadly away. "I can't," he said. "I can't do it."

"This isn't the usual type of car site," the little man said, "and ordinarily this car wouldn't be for sale. But I have a responsibility, one might say, to the memory of Mr. Carnetti, who admired amusing gestures. You are a man of amusing gestures yourself, as I have observed. Mr. Carnetti would be pleased with you. He would want you to have his car and—

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believe me—you will never regret buying it." The little man reached into his pocket and brought forth a gleaming key. "Gold," he said. "Mr. Carnetti's golden key. Take it. Go home, get your car and bring it to me with a cheque for five hundred and fourteen dollars and Mr. Carnetti's car is yours. I will have the transfer of title and bill of sale ready when you get back."

Geoffrey tried to move back, to refuse, to bring up his hands in a gesture of thrusting the little man and the golden key away; but the little man suddenly seemed to grow several inches, to become a commanding presence, and it was impossible to deny him.

"Take it," the little man said again, extending the key. "You will never have another chance like this."

Geoffrey's hands refused to obey him, and he took the key. When he touched it, he was filled with an unworldly feeling, like a man in a dream; all doubts left him, and he smiled at the little man and turned towards home.

When he returned with his old car and the cheque, the little man drove him home in the Locomobile and stopped it in his drive. They both got out and the Locomobile was immediately surrounded by the neighbourhood's small boys, who appeared from nowhere.

"It was kind of you to let me drive it once more," the little man said. "Well, all's well that I'm sure will end well, and I will say good-bye." He suddenly began to grin. "If the cops ever knew what a trick was played on—but never mind that. I will walk back. Good fortune to you." He thrust out his hand; Geoffrey shook it, and the little man moved away.

Still moving as a man in a dream, Geoffrey eased through the shoal of small boys and got into the Locomobile. The big engine came vibrantly alive at a touch on the starter; the little boys scrambled back out of the way when he put his hand on the horn and was rewarded by a long, well-remembered *ooogah*, and he rolled magnificently into the street.

He went through the gears, almost looking round to see if Uncle Adrian were beside him, cheering him on. There was not the smooth, decadent, liquid flow of power of modern cars; each big cylinder made itself felt, and the wind came round the windscreen, blew off his hat and rumpled his hair. He blew the horn several times more; cars got out of his way, and people stopped to stare. The steering wheel vibrated slightly in his hands, the ground went whirling past and the speedometer needle climbed, and he felt like Jove riding the thunder. It was wonderful.

He came to a park and turned into it as he and Uncle Adrian

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used to do, and stepped down on the accelerator. The Locomobile responded nobly, muttering happily to itself, and picked up speed. He went flying along, leaving a faint blue haze of smoke, staring nursemaids and immobilised pedestrians behind him. A block ahead, a police car turned into the park, the driver leaning from the window to stare. Although Geoffrey's hand was nowhere near the button, the horn gave a long *ooogah* like a triumphant view halloo, and the car seemed to leap forward. It turned towards the police car, and Geoffrey couldn't turn it away. It had taken over, it had the bit in its teeth, and he sat there, powerless, as they bore down on the police car. The officer driving realised now that he was the target; he pulled in his head, paled, gripped his wheel, and stepped on it, but the Locomobile pulled up beside him, then a little ahead and eased him inexorably towards the kerb. Geoffrey had been tugging at his own wheel and trying desperately to put on his brake; it had availed him nothing; but as the police car, neatly boxed, stopped three feet from a tree, control suddenly came back to him again.

The brakes worked, the Locomobile stopped, the engine fell at once to a contented grumble, and the two policemen boiled out of their car. They were visibly shaken.

They surrounded him. For a long moment nobody said anything. They glared at Geoffrey as though they were going to make a meal of him, and he shrank into himself and looked first at one and then at the other.

Finally the policeman nearer him, who was much older than the other and turning grey, closed his eyes, blew out a long breath and then opened his eyes again.

"Ah, now," the old policeman said, and Geoffrey could see that he restrained himself by a truly heroic effort, "and what would be the meaning of this caper?"

"I don't know, so help me," Geoffrey said in a small voice. "It got away from me. When you came round the corner, the horn blew itself, the car took over and was off after you. I couldn't stop it, and I couldn't steer it."

The old policeman looked at the young one and back to Geoffrey again. "So it got away from you," he said. "Well, now. Are you sure you were driving it yourself? And where did you get this—this thing that got away from you?"

"It belonged to a gentleman named Carnetti," Geoffrey said, "and I got—"

The old policeman gave a great start. "Carnetti?" he yelped. "Scarface Carnetti? The little guy that I put the pinch on, and them wantin' him for runnin' the hooch and income-tax

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evasion?" He stared hard at Geoffrey, with his mouth open. "Holy Mother!" he said and crossed himself. "How did he know that I was in the police car, and him destroyed by a sawed-off shotgun these fifteen years?"

He moved quickly round the long hood of the Locomobile and grabbed the young policeman with both hands. "He's after me," he said. "Mike, boy, get me out of here, for the love of the saints."

"How about this lunatic that was—?"

"The hell with him. Get me to Donovan's Bar. Let's go."

The young policeman shrugged; they both leapt into the police car and roared off. Geoffrey, a little shaken himself by the events of the last hour or so, sat looking after them. For a short space he didn't know what to think, confused by the talk about Scarface, the cops, the strange performance of the Locomobile and his narrow escape from the law. His head was whirling, and then suddenly there was a fine peace in it, and he realised he was listening to the contented rumbling of the idling engine and thinking of his Uncle Adrian. He had done better than his uncle had ever managed to do; he had run a couple of cops into the kerb and almost into a tree, and for some complicated reason was still at liberty. He began to grin and, raising his eyes to heaven, where Uncle Adrian was supposed to be, he sketched a greeting and a salute.

This done, he decided that he had had enough for one day, and there were some things he wanted to think about. He gingerly shifted into low gear and let out the clutch. The Locomobile started as demurely as a Locomobile had ever started, and he headed for home.

There was no difficulty; the car behaved itself. There were few people on the streets now, for it was almost dinnertime, and his progress was majestic and uneventful. He came to his drive and turned in and, as he approached the garage, the little man from the car site was suddenly standing right in front of him.

The little man was smiling; Geoffrey could see the white line of his teeth and the pale line of the scar with dreadful clarity over the radiator cap.

There was no time to stop. Geoffrey wrestled desperately with the wheel and as the Locomobile swung round he had the strange illusion that the little man was fading like smoke, and he could see the garage wall through him. Then he vanished completely, the right front wing hit the wall with a crash, and the car stopped.

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Geoffrey undraped himself from the steering wheel and scrambled out. He ran round the car and looked under it, but the little man wasn't anywhere. He had indeed vanished, if he had ever been there; and for a time Geoffrey stood massaging his ribs, wondering whether the events of the day had actually happened or whether they had been as insubstantial as the vision he had just seen, and he had imagined it all.

He shook his head and walked around the Locomobile again to assess the damage. The wing that had hit the wall was bent up about a foot from the tip; the underside of it was painted black, but at the place where the bend came and for several inches on each side of it the paint had flaked away and left the soft gleam of gold.

Geoffrey stared at it and forgot to breathe. An intimation, outrageous and unbelievable, of what had happened to him began to take form in his mind. He started to shake. He ran to the tool bench, picked up a heavy screwdriver, ran back to the wing and began to scrape. As the thick black paint scaled off, the gold appeared. The wing was plated underneath with gold; probably all of them were.

Geoffrey's legs gave way beneath him, and he sat down upon the ground. Inside his head the intimation clarified itself and took form, and he realised that for some reason the little man had bestowed upon him the profits of someone's wicked life of bootlegging and dodging taxes. To say that he was grateful would be putting it mildly; he was also quite baffled as to why the little man had picked him out.

Geoffrey would never know. As he sat there on the ground, facing his new-found wealth in rather dumbfounded fascination, the ghost of Mr. Carnetti—invisible now—hovered above him for a moment. Mr. Carnetti was smiling quite happily; he was well content and prepared to depart. It had been great fun to chisel the cops and put his illgotten gains where they couldn't find them, no matter how many of his surviving relatives they followed about or how many safe-deposit boxes they opened up. But the gold hadn't been doing any good. Now it would be back in circulation again, and the cops wouldn't get their hands on it this time either. Mr. Carnetti was sure of that. He had great faith that Geoffrey could evade them. For wasn't Geoffrey the right sort, a man who burnt up his lawnmower just for the hell of it?

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GANGSTER
A man with gunning little ways.

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SENTIMENTAL VALUE

I would often see two shadowy silhouettes sharing the magic of their closeness

BY STEPHEN FRANCES

TOWARDS the end of the dam building contract I was employed on in Sierra Leone, I received new orders cabled from London.

I'm a constructional engineer working for a world-wide organisation that boasts it will build anything anywhere at any time. I had been eagerly anticipating a few weeks' holiday, but when you earn the kind of salary that I am paid, you don't argue with orders from the man at the top.

Everything had been arranged in London. A cabin was reserved for me on a passenger ship stopping at Freetown, and Flinter, who would work with me on a new bridge project in Lagos, was already on board. Somebody at head office probably believed that friendly relationships between employees helped the work along and, for the voyage, had deliberately thrown Flinter and me together—which I never ceased to regret.

When the ship put into port I went aboard expecting Flinter to meet me. But it was two hours after the ship sailed before I finally ran him to earth in his cabin.

At first sight, he impressed me considerably. He was tall, well-built, and muscular, and as handsome as a film star. His teeth were an even white flash when he spoke, his eyes laughed impulsively, and his handgrip was powerful and reassuring. Yet after an hour in his company I positively disliked him.

He symbolised everything that I detest in a man. He was an arrogant snob, boastful, vain, and utterly selfish. He became disdainful when he learnt I wasn't public school, poured drinks for himself without inviting me, and talked about himself incessantly. If Flinter was to be believed, our company chairman consulted him about every important project before signing any contract. Soon he switched the conversation to women. His eyes shone with pride as he boasted of conquests he had already made on this trip down to Freetown. He saw himself as a

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twentieth-century, swashbuckling Don Juan. I saw him as a handsome bighead, devoid of any sincere feeling of affection, and notching up his conquests like an adolescent boy boasting about the number of girls he had kissed.

As soon as I could do so politely, I made my excuses and escaped from him, resolved to avoid him as much as possible throughout the voyage, but I doubt if Flinter noticed my absence.

Sea voyages in the romantic tropics are famed for arousing the passions of the fair sex and Flinter went through the cream of the feminine beauty aboard like a honed scythe laying low the ripe wheat. I discovered the other male passengers unanimously shared my opinion of Flinter, but there wasn't a woman on board who wasn't eager to fall victim to his fatal charm.

He might even have established a record for sea voyage conquests if he hadn't killed a man in Accra.

Our ship made a few hours' stop there and Flinter went ashore, presumably to sample the dusky beauties. He drank too much, got into a fight in a bar, and a man was killed.

A ship, with hundreds of passengers, and working to a tight schedule, doesn't tie up in port for days, waiting while one passenger attends an inquest. So, since I was supposed to accompany Flinter to Lagos, I stayed on in Accra with him.

Tim Rolt, a planter from Lagos, had come up to Accra on business. He was well-known and well-liked, but rather delicate after some years in the tropics. Flinter had towered over him. Nevertheless, Rolt, when driven to it, had fought off the drink-maddened Flinter until he had hardly the strength left to stand.

A final swinging haymaker from Flinter had torn him from his feet, hurling him backwards. He fell, smashing his skull against the corner of a marble tabletop, and died within minutes.

Rolt and his sister Muriel, who was devoted to him, together ran a tobacco plantation in Lagos. Muriel Rolt was given the tragic news by telephone and, as a privately-owned helicopter was just leaving for Accra, she arrived in time for the inquest.

Muriel Rolt was asked to identify the body, and when she gave evidence at the inquest was so shaken that the coroner called for an hour's recess.

Whatever many of us privately thought about Flinter compelling a man who was only half his size and weight to fight him couldn't affect the findings of the inquest. It was quite clearly a death caused by accident, and that was the verdict brought in. Flinter was then free to leave Accra.

At the docks I found the captain of a small steamer that plied the coast to Lagos, loading and discharging cargo. The journey

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would be slow but it would get us to Lagos before the next passenger ship so I booked two cabins, and we sailed that same day.

As soon as we had cast off and the course had been set, the bell went for dinner. We dined in a small saloon, Captain Grant, his sister Lucy, Flinter, and myself. But the table was set for five.

Captain Grant noticed my surprised glance and said uncomfortably, " We have another passenger. She came aboard at the last moment. I think we should give her a few minutes' grace before we start."

Flinter's eyes gleamed with interest. " She? " he questioned. Already he had shrugged away all memory of Rolt's death.

Captain Grant eyed him levelly. " It's Muriel Rolt," he warned flatly. "She is going back to Lagos."

After the startled silence that followed, Captain Grant added, " I informed her about her companions on board. But she must get back to Lagos as quickly as possible."

For most men it would have been an acutely embarrassing situation, but Flinter had the hide of a rhinoceros. A few minutes later when Muriel Rolt came in, quietly composed but tragic-eyed, Flinter rose to his feet gallantly, switched on his charm, and said with a flashing smile, " I sincerely hope that terrible accident won't cause strained relations between us, Miss Rolt."

She was very much more composed than at the inquest. She looked at him steadily and said in a low voice, " Thank you, Mr. Flinter." Then she added, " We must have all felt the strain of the accident very deeply." Her voice faltered a moment. " Perhaps it will be better if we try not to refer to it again."

It was a magnificent gesture on her part. Especially as she quite obviously felt her brother's death deeply, and whatever the legal findings of the court, she could not have failed to know that most of us thought it little short of murder. Poor courageous Rolt had been practically out on his feet when he had received that last killing blow.

But Flinter was incapable of remorse and behaved as though Muriel Rolt's words had magically relieved him of all moral responsibility. He talked incessantly and, of course, he talked about himself. While his white teeth flashed in a captivating smile he related adventure after adventure, all of which proved what a fine fellow Flinter was.

Captain Grant and his sister ate in carefully detached silence. I was sitting opposite Muriel Rolt and I took the opportunity to weigh her up. She was a quiet girl with liquid brown eyes that were tragic with sorrow. She was rather plain and her

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features reflected the strain she had recently undergone. But she possessed personality. While she was in the room, I couldn't help being conscious of her presence. Some girls tint their hair, make up vividly, or flash nylon-sheathed legs with calculated carelessness yet can still go unnoticed. But even when she was sitting demurely and not speaking, Muriel had that quality of making men aware of her. She was essentially feminine.

Flinter talked non-stop, but dinner was almost over before I realised what he was building up to. My blood ran cold. He had killed Muriel's brother, yet with insolent selfishness he was now setting out to overwhelm Muriel with his fatal charm.

I shuddered with disgust. Not content with bringing tragedy into Muriel's life, he now sought to make a conquest of her, turn her into one more love-scalp about which he could boast in waterfront bars.

Anger and revulsion boiled up inside me, but I suppressed it. Muriel couldn't take her eyes off Flinter. She listened fascinatedly, watched his strong, gesturing hands, gazed at his handsome face, and showed all the symptoms of infatuation.

Just once, Captain Grant's eyes momentarily met mine and we shared an understanding of what was happening. But it was not for us to order the lives of others, and we studiously avoided intruding on an affair which was not our concern.

Dinner was not the strained, uncomfortable meal we had expected. On the contrary, with Flinter talking animatedly about sea-fishing and Muriel listening to him intently, it went off very smoothly. There was only one awkward moment—when Flinter offered Muriel a cigarette.

"No, thank you," she said. "I always smoke my own brand." She produced a worn, silver cigarette-case bearing the initials T.R.

With typical thoughtlessness, Flinter asked, "That's a nice case. Where did you get it?"

Muriel dropped her eyes. "It was Tim's," she said quietly. Then, quickly changing the subject, she asked with false brightness, "Have you done any skin-diving on your fishing trips?"

"Plenty," said Flinter easily. He added with typical lack of modesty, "I'm a good all-round athlete. Mention any sport you choose and I guarantee to best almost anyone you can put up against me."

It was soon quite obvious that Muriel was falling victim to Flinter's charm. But Flinter took his time. The only other woman on board was Lucy, the captain's sister, who was pushing fifty, so Flinter's wooing of Muriel was gentle, tender, and unhurried. He was also handicapped because, owing to the

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limited passenger accommodation on a coastal steamer, Muriel shared a double-berth cabin with Lucy.

We chugged along the coast of Togoland and Dahomey, frequently anchoring in the lagoons while natives paddled out in large canoes to load and unload cargo. The days passed slowly and pleasantly, and the friendship between Flinter and Muriel ripened and flowered.

I must admit that my dislike for Flinter became mingled with envy. These tropical nights with the heavens ablaze with stars, and a balmy, scent-laden air heavy with romance, roused a deep ache in me for feminine company. And when I took a lonely stroll round the deck, consoling myself with my pipe, I would often see the shadowy silhouettes of Flinter and Muriel sharing the magic of their closeness. I would return sadly to my cabin, boiling with resentment against Flinter.

Our last major port of call before Lagos was at Cotonou. We arrived at midday, tying up at a rusted, iron pier, and began to take on a cargo of palm-oil.

It was loaded amidships into a hold surrounded by a metal parapet some two feet high. The hatches were removed, two gangways lowered to the pier, and an endless column of black-skinned stevedores carried aboard the casks. I was fascinated, watching the almost naked natives giving a practised shrug with their shoulders to send a gleaming jet of palm-oil spurting into the hold from the cask they carried.

Despite the burning sun, I stood watching the level of the palm-oil rise higher and higher. I was probably seeing this scene for the first and last time in my life and I took it all in hungrily. It would have made a film: the shining black limbs, moist with perspiration; the silky ripple of muscles; the cascade, the flow, and then trickle of the yellowy-orange palm-oil from the upended casks; the hum of insects in the hot air and the gentle roll of the moored steamer.

Captain Grant came to stand by me and cocked a wise eye at the sun. "It's a pity," he said, "there won't be enough light to finish loading tonight. We shan't get away until morning."

The hold was three-quarters full now, a transparent yellowy-orange pool almost seven feet deep. It looked so delicious that my mouth watered. Muriel and Flinter too were quietly sharing the pleasure of watching the golden-orange liquid cascade from the casks.

After dinner I left them together and went to my cabin to read. But it was a hot night and I wasn't sleepy, so finally I decided to smoke a last pipe on deck before retiring.

I strolled towards the bows, but when I saw the silhouette of

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Muriel and Flinter embracing as they leaned against the rails, I discreetly turned and went towards the stern of the ship.

Returning to my cabin half an hour later, I again encountered Flinter and Muriel. They were two dark shadows merged together as they shared a lover's good-night outside the door of her cabin.

I coughed to warn of my approach, and said gruffly, " Good night."

They murmured replies, and Muriel took her cigarette-case from her handbag. She selected a cigarette, and then gave a little cry of dismay as the case slipped from her fingers. It clinked against the iron parapet, was deflected, and skidded across the deck and down into the hold.

Flinter said lightly, " Don't worry about it, darling. I'll get it back for you."

" Oh, can you? " Muriel said gratefully. She sighed with relief. " I couldn't bear to lose it." She paused, and then added almost in a whisper, " It has a sentimental value."

" It was poor Tim's, wasn't it? " sympathised Flinter. The mawkish sentimentality in his voice made me turn away.

I entered my cabin, irritated and resentful, and it was a long time before I got to sleep.

I was awakened early by one of the native crew who agitatedly gestured that Captain Grant wanted to see me. Sensing the urgency in his request, I hurriedly climbed into my white ducks, and went on deck.

Captain Grant was standing by the hold containing the palm-oil. He stared down into it expressionlessly. When I reached his side, I followed the direction of his gaze and gave a start of horror. Seen clearly through the transparency of the palm-oil was Flinter, lying on the bottom of the tank, seeming almost to be asleep.

I caught my breath.

The captain said grimly, " He must have been there hours." He pointed to the clothing Flinter had discarded before he dived into the hold.

I shuddered. Even though you despise a man, it's a shock to learn of his sudden death.

Behind us I heard the tapping of high heels on the deck, and I made an involuntary movement to prevent Muriel seeing Flinter. But it was too late. Already she was at the parapet, and staring down into the hold.

I was dreading her reaction to this second tragedy, but her face was completely expressionless as she stared down through

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the transparent palm-oil at Flinter's body. Minutes ticked past, but not one flicker of emotion touched her face.

I sighed. Somebody had to get Flinter out. I kicked off my shoes and swung one leg over the parapet.

Muriel screamed. "Stop."

I shot her a startled glance and saw her eyes were frightened and alarmed. Yet even before she had screamed, Captain Grant had grasped me strongly by the arm, his fingers gouging into my flesh. Mystified, I looked at him inquiringly; then Muriel abruptly turned away and went to her cabin.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Somebody has to get him out. I don't mind going down for him."

"Don't *you* know either?" he asked sadly.

"Know what?"

"Palm-oil is much lighter than water."

"And so?"

"You can't swim in palm-oil," he said. "It hasn't enough buoyancy. You'd go straight to the bottom like a stone, no matter how frantically you swam."

The native crew dredged up Flinter's body with chickenwire stretched between bamboo poles. They also recovered a cigarette-case. Captain Grant gave it to me. "I believe this belongs to Miss Rolt. Would you like to return it to her?"

When Muriel answered my knock on the door of her cabin, her face was still quite expressionless.

I'd wiped the case clean and thrown away the sodden cigarettes. "I believe this is yours, Miss Rolt," I said.

She took it from me calmly. "It is," she said. "Thank you very much." She wasn't afraid to look me straight in the eyes.

In my mind I heard an echo of Flinter's voice saying, *Don't worry about it, darling. I'll get it back for you.*

"I'm glad I haven't lost it. It has a certain sentimental value," she added. Her eyes were still staring into mine quite levelly. "It was my brother's, you know."

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 136

Across. 1, *Pastry*. 4, *Withdrew*. 10, *Infancy*. 11, *Toll-bar*. 12, *Tuck*. 13, *Spinal cord*. 16, *Ninety*. 17, *Tenants*. 20, *Trireme*. 21, *Detour*. 24, *Gas-mantles*. 25, *Care*. 27, *Collide*. 29, *Carouse*. 30, *Priggish*. 31, *Monkey*.

Down. 1, *Painting*. 2, *Soft centres*. 3, *Rent*. 5, *Intended*. 6, *Half-loaves*. 7, *Rub*. 8, *World's*. 9, *Lymph*. 14, *Out for a duck*. 15, *Star-gazing*. 18, *Smothers*. 19, *Greenery*. 22, *Eggcup*. 23, *Fence*. 26, *Trio*. 28, *Lei*.

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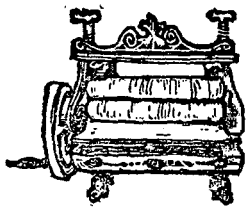
WASHING DAY



Home, and, being washing day, dined upon cold meat.
SAMUEL PEPYS

They that wash on Monday
Have all the week to dry;
They that wash on Tuesday
Are not so much awry;
They that wash on Wednesday
Are not so much to blame;
They that wash on Thursday
Wash for shame;
They that wash on Friday,
Wash in need;
And they that wash on Saturday,
Oh! They're sluts indeed.

Nursery Rhyme

With the Lid Off

Here he was, the manager of a home electric appliance factory; and did his family care whether his new fall model washing machine was going to be a success or not? No . . .

Yet a laboratory was no place to give a final test to a washing machine. You needed practical home conditions to see if it would stand the strain of a lot of feeble-minded women running it backwards all the time . . .

Some years the new model blew up the moment Belle touched the motor button. But more often Belle would get half the family washing done before a low peculiar whine caught her alert ear. She would leap to turn off the motor, not always before the whine turned into the mighty roar of the whole machine shaking apart before her very eyes. Other years, Belle would learn that something had gone a little wrong when she took the cover off the tub to remove the freshly washed clothes, only to find them floating in a sea of rich black oil.

RUTH MCKENNEY, *My Sister Eileen*

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The washing hangs upon the line,
Between the prunus and the arch
(Where tender leaves of rambler thrust),
On this gay day in middle March.

The washing bellies in the breeze,
Across the clothes blue shadows go,
Above the house the lark sings high,
Before me, see, two aprons blow.

To watch the patterns move criss-cross,
Cast from the branches of the pear;
For symphony the song of birds,
And daffodils beside my chair—

These are the simple joys of life;
With rippling clothes put out to dry,
Reflecting cleanliness and light
Beneath a wide and changing sky.

THEODORA ROSCOE

Ladies Only

Practically nobody aboard the *Porthos* ever saw Yang, the ship's laundryman . . . His laundry was a small, dark hole at the foremost part of the ship, five decks below the promenade deck . . . He was short, fat, and always cheerful.

Yang was recognised as an expert in ladies' underwear. He could tell you whether a woman was serious, quiet, gentle, frivolous, or catty from her déshabillés and négligés. He would point to some undies, saying, " That's a hot cookie," or " This one is a dud." . . . When I came down, Yang was ironing a dainty, pink-lace something, humming a Chinese melody. " The woman who wears this is a swell babe," he said. " Take your shirt back. I'm not in business for gents! "

JOSEPH WECHSBERG, *Looking for a Bluebird*

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Washing à la Mode

On the Saturday night, having tied up all the dirty linen in the largest bedsheet, we went together to the famous public wash-house in the Boulevard Victor-Hugo.

A number was attached to the bundle, its counterpart being given to the owner, and the attendant, armed like a halberdier with a tall pole, then threw the bundle into the centre of an immense copper in which the linen bubbled and boiled. The next day the bundle, plainly numbered, would be found on an iron trolley, and then my mother would take her place in the long line of kneeling women who, their sleeves rolled up, their bodies moving rhythmically, scrubbed and soaked in the limpid water.

I loved this wash-house because we walked on planks under which the water lapped and gurgled. Women of all worlds came here, from the most vulgar to the most respectable, who quickly struck up wash-house acquaintanceship. Waiters from the neighbouring cafés moved deftly among us, selling buttered rolls, croissants, hot coffee, and glasses of rum, but those who did the briskest business were the fortune-tellers who interpreted the future in the lines of wet palms . . .

MRS. ROBERT HENREY, *The Little Madeleine*

The Laundress v. The Gentlewoman

I heard by her tale she would banish the sun,
Then were we poor laundresses all undone.
Except the sun shine that our clothes may dry,
We can do right nought in our laundry . . .
For of these twain I think it far better
Thy face were sunburned and thy clothes the sweeter.

JOHN HEYWOOD, *The Play of the Weather* c.1530

The End in Sight

Monday, of course, was washing day . . . The steam would rise in great clouds, smelling of soda and blue-mottled soap, round her pink face and damp fair hair. It was hard work, but my mother set about it with a gay, dashing energy, hauling heavy, soaking-wet blankets out of the tub and wringing them easily with her strong, capable hands. By dinner-time, the heaviest part of the job was over, and we would sit down to a lunch of cold meat and bread and butter and tea, with the washing all pegged out, waving and drying in the back lane. It was a satisfying moment . . . JAMES KIRKUP, *The Only Child*

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ESTUARY

by Stan Barstow

IT COMES in fast, doesn't it?" Parker said. He sat with his large soft-skinned hands holding his coffee cup at a table in the window of the café over the confectioner's shop and watched the rippling grey line of the bore as it swept silently up the channels between the low muddy sandbanks in the river-mouth.

It was the first time that one of his mid-morning visits to the café had given him such a good view of the tide at the most impressive stage of its sweep into the estuary. The first time also, since he plodded up the lino-covered stairs three days ago, that he had addressed any words of conversation to the grey-haired, bespectacled waitress who stood beside him now with ballpen poised over her bill-pad.

He was a hefty young man, crouching bulkily, shoulders hunched, over the flimsy table. But his skin had the pallor of recent illness, and she guessed he had lost some weight.

"There won't be a bit of land to be seen in half an hour," the waitress said. "It fills up quickly once it starts."

Parker saw how the bore, its uninterrupted sweep broken by the concrete feet of the railway viaduct, encircled and isolated the smooth mounds of dark river sand.

"It'd be an easy thing to get cut off, I reckon."

"They've to fetch people out every year," the waitress said.

"Don't they see the danger?"

"Some people never see danger till it's too late," the waitress said. "Of course, it isn't all that bad at this time of year. But you should see it in spring. We get some real tides then. If anybody gets in then they don't stand much chance, I can tell you. They get caught in the current under the bridge and you can't get to them in time. We had a man drowned there this year."

There was unconscious satisfaction in her voice: an involuntary touch of pride in this dangerous phenomenon on her doorstep.

Parker drained his cup and felt for some money.

"It was two vanilla slices, wasn't it?"

"Yes, two."

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He was reminded once again, with a pang, of his mother as the waitress made out the bill and laid it by his plate.

"Pay downstairs at the desk, sir, if you please."

He had always had a sweet tooth and every day when the local confectioner had delivered his tray of cakes and pastries to the little general shop, Parker's mother had kept her sharp eye and tongue on guard. "You just keep your hands off them vanilla slices, Bernard my lad. I'm watching you and they're all accounted for."

He put a threepenny bit on the table and went downstairs. When he had settled his bill at the counter in the shop he walked across the narrow promenade to the river wall and sat down on a bench to watch the tide.

A few small boats, grounded on the shore, moved and eventually floated as the water curled under and lifted them. A train rattled across the viaduct and Parker saw the anonymous faces of the passengers as they were carried over the deepening water which swirled about the legs of the structure. The sun glistened on the water, and down on the narrowing shore a child laughed in a sudden spasm of joy. The menace of the tide fascinated Parker and held him there while the sandbanks were slowly submerged and the estuary became an unbroken stretch of water, calm enough on the surface but current-corrupted beneath, from a few yards below his feet to the distant line of the far shore; and it was not until the noon sun clanged brassily off the water into his eyes and he stood up to walk back to his lodgings that his mind sank again into contemplation of the emptiness of his life.

It was a small and cosy life he had lived with his mother in the years since his father died. Unlike his father he had felt no pull from the world outside the little shop with the house behind it. He had never much cared for his father, whom he vaguely felt had held him in some contempt, and when his father died he had drawn closer than ever to his mother in an understanding where monosyllables and gestures conveyed almost all they wished to say. And he was content. There seemed no reason why anything should change. He never thought about it. But then he had contracted pneumonia and while he was in the period of crisis, fighting for his own life, his mother had two strokes in quick succession, the second one finishing her. They told him nothing until they felt him strong enough to take the news; and even so it was not until he went back to the closed shop and the empty house that full realisation of it all broke into his stupefied mind.

He would be wise to get away for a while, the doctor said.

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Have a complete change; go somewhere quiet and stroll in the sun; sort himself out and come to terms with his new life. So he had come here to sit on the narrow promenade or drink coffee and eat vanilla slices in the café over the shop while the tide ran into the estuary from the sea.

Every day Parker came down the hill from his lodgings to watch the tide. He would have liked to explore the country inland but he still tired easily, and only during the second week did he venture along the river walk that led off the promenade and gave on to a tree-lined stretch of shore out of sight of the village. Here he found that he could sit, away from people, in an almost mindless contemplation of the river in which the pain of the change in his life was curiously dulled. And here, on the third day, he saw the swimmer.

Men quite often bathed inshore off the promenade, but this head bobbed far out where the sea ran at its strongest into the basin. Parker stood there for some time, watching the tiny distant movements of the swimmer in the waste of water. Then he crunched slowly across the shingle to the pile of clothing which lay just above the high-water line. There seemed to be only one garment there: a bathrobe of soft red-and-white striped towelling. He could also see now through the trees a white-stuccoed house with a flat parapeted roof. When he turned back to the river it took him a moment to locate the swimmer, and

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he saw the man was making for the shore, swimming with strong sure strokes. Some minutes later he became aware that the swimmer wore a bathing-cap and was not a man but a woman.

He wanted to move away but curiosity kept him there until she reached the shallows and stood up to walk out. Then it was too late to go without speaking. As she came towards him, removing the rubber cap and shaking her head to free the short dark hair, he said awkwardly, " I was just thinking you might be in trouble."

Black, expressionless eyes met his briefly. " No, no trouble."

" They said it was dangerous to swim any way out."

" It's all right if you're a strong swimmer," the woman said.

Though older than himself, she was still young: about thirty, Parker thought. As she dropped the cap and lifted her hands to her hair she stretched herself tall in the wet clinging skin of the black one-piece costume. Her whole body gave an impression of flatness in its width of hips and the smooth undeveloped curves of her breasts, which reminded Parker later of the gentle mounds of sand in the estuary. Her face was dark and sallow-skinned, and her black eyes seemed never to lose that constant inscrutable stare.

She took cigarettes from a pocket of the robe, offering them to Parker and, when he refused, lighting one for herself. Then she put the robe on and began to rub herself dry, the smoke from the cigarette between her pale lips making her narrow her eyes.

" It's the only exciting thing round here," she said suddenly. " Everything else is half dead."

" I was wondering if I ought to go for help," Parker said.

" It would have been too late," she said. " They couldn't have got a boat to me in time."

He looked after her when, a few minutes later, she walked away with an easy, graceful swing of her body towards the trees, and she came into his mind from time to time during the rest of the day. Until, when he was undressing for bed, he found himself wondering why he should think of her. He had never needed women in his little world and, apart from a momentary flicker of sexual curiosity about some girl in the shop or a face glimpsed briefly on the television screen, thoughts of them had not troubled him. Yet he thought of this one, the flat body, the undeveloped breasts, and unfathomable black eyes coming back to him time and again. Always he saw her lifting herself out of the water as he had seen her that morning, and it seemed to him that she had become inextricably associated with his thoughts of the tide and its fascination for him.

He drifted off into a heavy, dream-laden sleep in which he

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found himself down in the estuary, walking on one of the sand-banks at night. He became aware of the bore, silver in the moonlight, sweeping silently along the channels on either side and in sudden fear he turned one way and another to find water all round him. He began to run across one of the channels, feeling the water deepening round his legs until all at once there was nothing under his feet and he was thrashing madly, in panic, trying to keep his head up and shouting at the top of his voice, "I can't swim. I can't swim." The woman's voice answered him, "It's all right if you're a strong swimmer." He had a sense of someone near him, and then he began to shout again as a terrible pressure forced him under the surface. The water flooded his lungs and the blood beat in his head until he thought his brain would burst.

He was crouching near the foot of the bed when he woke, the clothes spilling over on to the floor. He dragged them up round him and lay shivering in the dark, his body clammy with sweat, his heart beating with sickening force.

Behind the house where Parker was staying were fields trailing off into common land which ran up into the wooded headland that cut off the view of the bay and the open sea. For some time he had felt a desire to watch the full sweep of the tide as it rolled in across the sands. The rim of the headland looked to be no more than a mile and a half away, and on a hot afternoon towards the end of the second week he set out to walk up there.

Crossing the common, climbing steadily all the time, he felt the sun on his back and he took off his jacket and carried it over his arm. By the time he reached the edge of the trees he was tired and thirsty. His thighs ached and his armpits were soaked in sweat. The distance to the headland, foreshortened in the view from his bedroom window, was twice his original estimate and it was only the thought that he could not have very much farther to go, and it would be cooler under the trees, that kept him going forward. The paths he had seen seemed to lead away from his objective and he had ignored them, climbing in what he judged to be a direct line to the headland across the rough tussocky grass. Now, at the edge of the wood, his view of the higher ground cut off, he faced the way he wanted to go and walked straight in under the trees.

Five minutes later he seemed to be lost, and looking back he could not make out the way he had come. He was entirely alone and even the occasional bird-calls seemed a part of the silence which surrounded him. When he saw two sets of initials cut into the trunk of a silver birch he reached out to them as if for

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reassurance. RF—GL: friends who had been this way, stood on this same spot, ten years ago. Or, more likely, lovers, welcoming the solitude of the wood. Parker gazed pensively at the letters as his relaxed fingers traced their outline.

He went on, hoping for some break in the trees which would allow him to get his bearings, and came presently into an open space that turned out to be a trap of grass-covered brambles into which he blundered and entangled his legs, falling forward and slashing his hands and face before he pulled himself clear and lay flat on the ground, his heart hammering, his breath coming in short painful gasps.

As his body relaxed he closed his eyes and slept for a time, waking with dry hard lips and a raging desire for water. He got on to his feet and clutched at a tree as the wood reeled before his eyes in a blur of sunlight and shadow. When he felt steadier he began to move down through the trees. It was rough going: he clambered down steep banks and skirted impenetrable thickets, not knowing just where he was going but always heading downhill, his throat parched, his head swimming from over-exertion. He had done too much, he kept telling himself; a lot too much. He was a fool for ever having taken it on. His mother would— No, not his mother. He stopped abruptly in his thinking at the inescapable fact that his mother would never rebuke him again. There was no one to rebuke him. He could do as he liked. His behaviour and his welfare were matters for himself now. He was on his own. "Are them shoes wet, Bernard? Change your clothes. You're asking for pneumonia delivering orders in them wet things." Never again. She'd always said he had a stubborn, foolhardy streak that he'd inherited from his father . . .

Ten minutes of downhill stumbling and scrambling brought him, almost exhausted, first to signs of tree-felling and then a vehicle-width track with the impressions of heavy tyres in the soft black earth. Now the going was easier. He caught glimpses of the river through the trees and then the glare of sunlight on the white walls of a house. The sun caught him again as he emerged from the shade of the trees and he wondered if he dare ask at the house for water. He shrank from it, but he had never known such a demanding thirst. Still thinking of it, he went along under a tall cedarboard fence until he came to a gate. He was standing there in indecision when the woman he had watched swimming in the estuary two days before came up the lane from the direction of the shore.

Her bare feet were in rope sandals. She wore a pale blue cotton beach-dress, tied at the waist and reaching halfway down her thighs.

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Parker saw as she came nearer that her hair was damp, and he knew she had been swimming. For some reason the knowledge started small fluttering tremors of excitement in the bottom of his stomach.

She looked at him without recognition. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I was up the hill," Parker stammered. "I got lost . . . I was wondering if I could have a drink of water."

He stood aside as she reached for the latch of the gate. Her gaze rested on him, and he felt a flush of colour spreading up from his neck.

"You'd better come in."

He followed her to the kitchen door and waited while she ran a tumbler of water and brought it to him on the step. He drank it straight down without stopping. It took his breath away and he gasped as he lowered the tumbler from his lips.

"I was ready for that."

She took the glass. "Don't you feel well? You look pale, and there's blood on your face."

"I got lost," Parker told her again; "up the hill there. Then I fell headfirst into some brambles."

"You look done in," the woman said. "Look, why not come in and sit down for a while?"

"Oh, I'll be all right now," Parker said. "I feel better already."

She asked him if he was staying in the village. Then, "You really ought to come in and sit down. You don't want to walk any more till you've had a rest."

He was uncomfortable under her direct expressionless gaze. He said, "Well, just for a minute, then. I don't want to put you out."

"Don't be silly," she said, turning into the house. "Come on."

He was conscious once again of the grace of her movements as she led him through the kitchen and into a long, airy lounge with big windows looking out towards the river.

"Sit down," she said. "You'll feel better after a rest."

Parker lowered himself on to the edge of an armchair.

"I don't want to get in your way."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. She put her hand on his shoulder and pressed him back into the soft upholstery.

"Sit back," she said. "Be comfortable."

Her complete self-possession astonished Parker. He had never met anyone quite like her before. But he rested his head back gratefully and looked round the room, hearing the chink

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of a glass behind him, then her voice saying, " Here, drink this. It'll set you up."

He took the glass she held out to him.

" It's brandy," she said as he looked at it. " More pep in it than water."

" I don't reckon to—" he began, and she said, " Drink it up. It'll do you good."

She sat on the arm of a chair opposite him as he sipped from the glass.

" Better? "

He nodded, feeling the fire of the brandy in his throat.

" Have you walked a long way? "

" I set off for the top," Parker said, " but I got lost and came down again."

She nodded. " It's easy to lose your sense of direction round here."

" I wanted to watch the tide coming in," Parker said. " But I took too much on."

" Too much? It's not far if you know the way. Aren't you used to walking? "

She made statements and asked questions in the same flat, incurious voice, as though she was concerned only in asking and not with the answers he gave her. And the black eyes seemed to support this; for though they never left him for more than a few seconds, they rested so dispassionately on him they seemed to be occupied with some aspect that was of him yet somehow not of him. It struck him that she regarded him with the withdrawn composure of someone contemplating an object.

" I've been poorly, you see," he told her. " I'm supposed to be resting and getting meself well again, not knocking meself up."

" You've been ill? " Her eyes moved again to his face.

" I had pneumonia."

" Bad? "

" I nearly died," Parker said. " I was lucky."

Surprisingly now, she began to admonish him, as though she had some personal interest in his welfare . . . " You need somebody to stop you doing silly things. Are you married? "

Parker shook his head. " No. I lived with my mother, but she died."

He was ill at ease again. He looked into his glass, then lifted it to take another sip of the brandy. It was doing him good. He felt a lot better already.

" What made you come to this place? Have you been before? "

" No, but I wanted somewhere quiet and it was recommended to me."

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She was at the window now, looking out, her back to him. He felt easier.

"It's quiet, all right," she said. "I've lived here for three years. Since I got married. I was on the stage before that." She spun round to face him. "Did you guess I'd been on the stage? Could you tell?"

"I thought there was something about you," Parker said.

She nodded. "You can always tell. It stamps you, being on the stage."

She went into a long story about herself, about her career before her marriage, telling him of the shows she had appeared in, the towns she had visited, the people she had met.

Until, in a break in her monologue, Parker said, "What made you give it up if you liked it so much?"

"Liked it?" She gazed at him as though looking straight through him to something beyond him. Then she shrugged. "I suppose it's all right if you've got what it takes. But there was no future in the kind of stuff I was doing. It was cheapjack stuff. It's all right if you can get on, but I knew I never could. I hadn't what it takes. I hadn't the figure, for one thing."

Parker looked at her in the short beach-dress, at the light tan on her limbs. He said diffidently, "I think you've got nice legs."

"Oh, they're all right," she said indifferently. "But I've no bust." She ran her hands down over her flat breasts, posing in the sunlight flooding through the big window. "Bust is all they want nowadays. You can't give them too much of it. Besides, I'm not pretty. And my skin's sensitive. You might not think so, but it is. It couldn't stand all that make-up."

Parker drank off the last of his brandy.

"Do you want another drink?" she asked him. "Some more brandy, or some whisky?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. That was all right."

"A cigarette, then?"

Parker said no. "I don't smoke."

"Haven't you ever smoked?"

"No, I never got the habit."

She took a cigarette for herself from a chrome-plated box on the low occasional table and lit it before sitting on the cushioned windowseat and swinging her feet up to stretch full length her long flat body and graceful legs. She puffed inexpertly on the cigarette, without inhaling.

Anxious not to outstay his welcome, Parker was gathering words of leavetaking when she spoke again. "I left the stage for security," she said. "That's what everybody wants, isn't it?"

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" I suppose so," Parker said.

" Yes, but it's dull," she said. " It's so dull I could scream." She turned her head towards him for a moment. " I'm talking a lot, aren't I? "

" I don't mind," Parker said. " I think mebbe I should be going, though."

" Miles was married before, you know," she said. " He'd been married a long time. He's nearly sixty. They don't like me round here. They remember his first wife. She was in on everything. Miles is disappointed that I don't mix more. But I've tried to be friendly and they don't like me. I can feel it. They think I hooked Miles, but they're wrong. He was mad about me. He begged me to marry him. I was quite a time making up my mind."

Parker sat forward in his chair and put down the empty glass. He took his mind off the woman by concentrating on the effect of the brandy. It had done him a power of good. An early night tonight and he'd be all fixed up.

" We don't go out much," the woman was saying. " There's nothing to do here: no shops or theatres. But Miles doesn't mind. He plays the gramophone when he's at home." She reached down and slid open a cupboard under the windowseat, revealing neat rows of records in their sleeves. " Look at all those. That's all he does besides fishing. All he does: play records. Nothing lively though; all dull stuff: Beethoven, Handel, Mozart. The duller they are, the more Miles likes them . . ."

" Is that why you swim in the river? " Parker said.

" It's the only exciting thing round here," she said. " And I can only do that when Miles isn't at home. He's furious if he knows I've done it. He lost a boy in the bay once. He's never got over it. It was his only child. He talks about it sometimes, when he's feeling sentimental. Then it makes me feel good to know I can beat it."

Parker got up. He didn't know where to put his hands.

" I ought to be going."

She came out with him and at the gate he thanked her again. " Saved me life, I reckon," he said, forcing a tight grin.

" You can come again, if you like," she said. " You could sit out in the garden and rest. You're too pale; you need sun."

" I go home Saturday," Parker told her.

" Well, come tomorrow. See if you can get your face red to go home with. You can't go back looking so pale."

There was nobody to notice, anyway, Parker thought. He said, " I could come in the afternoon, I suppose."

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"Yes, do that. Come after lunch."

She showed him the shortest way back to the village and he left, carrying with him the image of her running her hands over her body in the sunlight, the excitement fluttering in him as he thought of this and the flood of talk released in the extremity of her boredom. There was no need to go back, he told himself. He could decide tomorrow.

"Would you like another drink?" she asked, and Parker started. The silence since either of them had spoken had been so long that, dozing himself, he had thought her asleep. There was a tray with tumblers and a vacuum jug of iced lime-juice in the shade of the trees nearby.

Parker said, "No, thanks," and lifted himself on to his elbows on the rug. He had been in the garden for nearly an hour now. The sun was hot again and his shirt clung damply under his arms.

After lunch he had sat for a time in the garden of the cottage before setting out across the village. He entered the grounds of the house by the main gate, walking up the driveway and mounting the shallow steps to press the bell by the front door. There was no reply and he rang again, wondering if she had forgotten her invitation; forgotten him, even, as soon as he had gone from her sight.

The house was quiet in the strong sunlight; deeply quiet, as though life had abandoned it, leaving it clean, preserved, but dead: a museum piece. It would be like one of those fantastic stories you sometimes read, he thought, if somebody else came to the door and told him they'd never heard of the woman. It struck him then that he did not know her name, and she had never asked his. He came down the steps again and walked with an increasing feeling of unreality round the side of the house to a gate in the tall cedar fence which shut off the garden and the back of the house. He opened it and went through, starting across the flagged area to the kitchen door before he saw her, lying face down on a travelling-rug by a border of flowering shrubs at the far end of the lawn.

She became aware of him before he was halfway to her.

"I thought you'd decided not to come," she said. She raised herself on her elbows as he approached. The dark look flickered on to his face, then away again as she relaxed as before, with her face on her arms.

She was wearing a bathing-costume: not the one he had seen her swimming in, but a very brief two-piece of soft dark red wool.

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" I rested for a bit," Parker said.

" Isn't that what you were supposed to do here? " she said, and Parker thought she sounded like a petulant lover who had been kept waiting; not someone whom he had known only a few days; with whom he had exchanged only a few casual words before yesterday.

" I suppose so," he said.

He stood looking down at her, at the sallow skin of her neck and the broadness of her back with the straight spinal gully between firm pads of flesh. When she didn't speak again he dropped his jacket and sat down beside her on the rug, resting his weight on one arm.

" I was just thinking how nice a drink would be," she said then. " I'll get some in a minute . . ."

Now, after the long silence, she said, " I don't know how you can bear all those clothes on. You should have brought some trunks and changed in the house."

" I haven't got any," Parker told her. " I can't swim."

" I could teach you in a week," she said. " But you're going home tomorrow, aren't you? "

" Yes," Parker said. " Tomorrow."

" What do you do at home? "

" I've got a little shop: grocery."

" Does it pay its way? "

" It does pretty fair . . . Course, there's only me to keep out of it now."

There in the hot sunlight he was all at once mourning for his mother again, knowing that he was near to the time when he must go home and face day-to-day existence without her. He had avoided making plans, as though unable to face the inevitable. Now he would be forced to think about it: about the housework and help in the shop; about the loneliness.

" You'll have to find yourself a girl," the woman said. " Get married."

Just like that, Parker thought. It was the obvious thing. But the very thought of taking a wife into his life filled him with dread. And who could it be?

She had turned her head so that she could see him.

" Don't you bother with girls much? " she said, and Parker made an awkward, bashful movement of his hand without speaking.

" Somebody will take you in hand," she said. " There'll be somebody with her eye on you now."

" I don't think so," Parker said.

" You don't know much about women."

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" You're right there," Parker said.

Her eyes were on him in one of those long moments of contemplation that so filled him with awkwardness and a feeling of inadequacy. He plucked at the cropped grass. What was he doing here, anyway? After ten days of being alone, looking at the river, thinking about home, he was here in a private garden with this strange, bored, restless woman. And she was leading the way at every step, spinning out of her boredom a web of excitement which gripped him now as it had from the first.

" The sun's moving round," she said, taking her eyes off him. " We ought to be up on the roof."

" The roof? " he said stupidly.

" Yes. We can lie in the sun up there. That's what it's meant for."

She sprang up and held out her hand. " Come on."

Parker allowed himself to be led across the lawn and into the house. The way to the roof lay up thickly carpeted stairs and along a corridor with closed white-painted doors. At the end of the corridor Parker followed the woman up another short flight of steps to a door which opened out into the sunlight.

At once Parker felt acutely exposed standing there on top of the house. He looked at the woman who was at the rail surmounting the low parapet gazing out at the river. She beckoned him and he went and stood beside her.

" Look," she said, " it's coming in."

The view was better than any he had had before. From here he could see part of the bay and the low grey line of the sea, thrusting its foaming fringe before it deep into the river channels, and as he watched he felt the woman's fingers entwine themselves in his. There was a surprising strength in their grip, but it seemed to Parker that she was hardly conscious of him, all her concentration focused on the sweep of the tide. He wondered what was in her mind as she looked out there minute after minute, and all at once he was aware that she was afraid of the sea and he trembled slightly, feeling the heat and tension of her body against his forearm.

At last she released his hand and turned away to sink down on a large airbed which lay inflated on the flat roof. She lay with her face hidden from him. It was as though she had forgotten him.

Parker got down beside her in a silence that grew into minutes. He said at length, " Are you asleep? "

" No . . . There's a bottle of suntan lotion somewhere about. Will you rub some into my back? "

Parker found the lotion and poured some into his hands. He

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held them poised over her back, unable to touch her until she said, " Can't you find it? "

" Yes, I've got it."

" Go on, then," she said. " Don't be shy."

Parker flushed. He knelt beside her and laid his hands on her back. He began to work the lotion into her skin, the movement of flesh and muscle under his hands transmitting itself to him in slow mounting waves of excited feeling. When his fingers touched the string holding the upper half of her costume she said, " Unfasten it."

He pulled at the bow and parted the two halves of the string.

" You have smooth strong hands," the woman said. " I could fall asleep with you doing that."

She stretched her limbs indolently, then relaxed again under the pressure of his touch. Again a feeling of exposure came over Parker.

" Can't anybody see us up here? "

" Nobody," the woman said. " We're as private as if we were inside four walls. Sometimes I sunbathe in the nude up here, but Miles doesn't like it. He's very prudish, really. When he sees me like that it reminds him of when I was on the stage. He was on a night out with some business acquaintances and he came back three more times in the same week. He wanted me to leave the stage straight away, but I wouldn't throw up everything for him. I told you I was a long time making up my mind. He followed me all over the country. He told me I'd the most exciting body he'd ever seen. But he forgot about his heart and that he wasn't a boy any longer."

" You can't stay young for ever," Parker said.

" You don't know anything about it, do you? " she said. " You live your own little life in your own little world, among people you've known for years . . ."

" I know what it's like to be lonely," Parker said.

" What is it like? "

" I reckon it's something you've got to get used to."

" You never get used to it," the woman said. " The most you can do is find moments when it goes away."

Parker was looking at her right hand which rested, fingers slightly open, on the blue airbed, and noticing for the first time that the little finger was curiously malformed. The sight of that twisted finger on the small and otherwise well-shaped hand aroused in him a feeling he had never known before. He did not know how to deal with this strange compassionate feeling except by putting his hand on her back again and moving it over her skin as though lightly applying more oil. But there was a

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difference in his touch, and under its new tender urgency the woman shuddered, then turned over without speaking in a quick movement that exposed to him for a moment the entire naked front of her body before she reached out to pull him down into the bruising ferocity of her kiss. The nails of one hand dug into his shoulder and the light fluttering gasp of her breath was on his face as she drew away to speak to him.

" Now," she said. " Be very quick."

He was nothing. He knew it through the flare of his response. Something the sea would use and discard. He thought it in the fleeting second before she took him, unresisting, plunging down with her into the vortex of her frenzy.

In the morning, his bag packed, Parker went back to look at the house. He had no words for the woman: no more than yesterday when he had left her as she slept in the sun. But something drew him back there. A car stood in the driveway, a large black saloon with dusty bodywork. He looked at it as he passed and went on without stopping.

The train was not busy and he found an empty compartment and settled himself by the window. As they swung out on the viaduct, the village falling away behind, Parker looked down the shoreline for a last glimpse of the white house through the trees. But there was nothing to see: nothing but the estuary, empty now, the smooth sandbanks drying in the sun, the river and its minor channels winding placidly out into the bay, free for a time of the deep dark treachery of the tide . . .

He thought about the woman often in the months that followed, and the memory of her brought a vague half-longing that sank him in moods of dreamy discontent. It was in one of these periods that he became engaged to the small plump slow-moving girl with the deep, tolerant laugh who had answered his advertisement for help; and since there was no reason to wait, he married her quickly and took her to live with him in the little house behind the shop. She was a good wife to him, and as the warmth and solid contentment of his new life enfolded him, the woman became increasingly dreamlike and remote until there came a time when he did not think of her any more.

© Stan Barstow 1963

A Yorkshireman, son of a miner, Stan Barstow's an engineer who turned to writing through sheer mental frustration. He produced A Kind of Loving, which was filmed and sent him rocketing to the top where he's stayed, modestly, ever since. A story collection, The Desperadoes, and a second novel, Ask Me Tomorrow, followed; a third is on the way.

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Machineries of Joy

FATHER BRIAN delayed going below to breakfast because he thought he heard Father Vittorini down there, laughing. Vittorini, as usual, was eating alone. So who was there to laugh with, or at?

Us, thought Father Brian, *that's who.*

He listened again.

Across the hall Father Kelly, too, was hiding, or meditating, rather, in his room.

They never let Vittorini finish breakfast, no, they always managed to join him as he chewed his last bit of toast. Otherwise they could not have borne their guilt through the day.

Still, that was laughter, was it not, below stairs? Father Vittorini had ferreted out something in the morning paper. Or, worse, had he stayed up half the night with the unholy ghost, the television set which stood in the dining-room like an unwelcome guest, one foot in whimsey, the other in the doldrums? And, his mind bleached by the electronic beast, was Vittorini now planning some bright fine new devilment, the cogs wheeling in his soundless mind, seated and deliberately fasting, hoping to lure them down curious at the sound of his Italian humours?

"Ah, God." Father Brian sighed and fingered the envelope he had prepared the previous night. He had tucked it in his coat as a protective measure should he decide to hand it to Monsignor Sheldon. Would Father Vittorini detect it through the cloth with his quick dark X-ray vision?

Father Brian pressed his hand firmly along his lapel to squash any merest outline of his request for transfer to another parish.

"Here goes."

And, breathing a prayer, Father Brian went downstairs.

"Ah, Father Brian!"

Vittorini looked up from his still-full cereal bowl. The brute had not even so much as sugared his cornflakes yet.

Father Brian felt as if he had stepped into an empty lift shaft.

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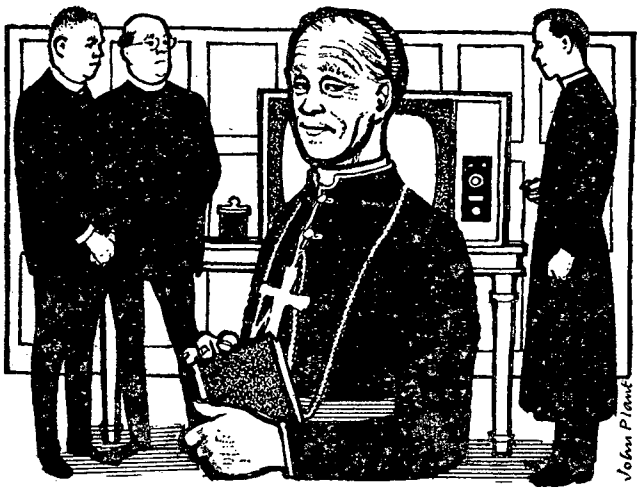

Impulsively he put out a hand to save himself. It touched the top of the television set. The set was warm.

"Did you have a seance here last night?"

"I sat up with the set, yes."

"Sat up, is right!" snorted Father Brian. "One does sit up, doesn't one, with the sick, or the dead? I used to be handy with the Ouija board myself. There were more brains in that." He turned from the electrical moron to survey Vittorini. "And did you hear far cries and banshee wails from—where is it?—Canaveral?"

"They called off the shot at three a.m."

"And you here now, looking daisy-fresh." Father Brian advanced, shaking his head. "What's true is not always what's fair."

Vittorini now vigorously doused his flakes with milk. "But you, Father Brian, you look as if you made the grand tour of Hell during the night . . ."

Fortunately, at this point Father Kelly entered. He froze when he, too, saw how little progress Vittorini had made with his fortifiers. He muttered to both priests, seated himself, and glanced over at the perturbed Father Brian.

"True, William, you look half gone. Insomnia?"

"A touch."

Father Kelly eyed both men, his head to one side. "What goes on here? Did something happen while I was out last night?"

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"We had a small discussion," said Father Brian, filling his bowl and toying with the dead flakes of corn.

"Small discussion!" said Father Vittorini. He might have laughed, but caught himself and said simply, "The Irish priest is worried by an Italian Pope. *Il Papa* is a constant source of reverent irritation to at least some if not all of the Irish clergy. Why not a Pope named Nolan? Why not a green instead of a red hat? Why not, for that matter, move Saint Peter's cathedral to Cork or Dublin, come the 25th century?"

"I hope nobody said *that*," said Father Kelly.

"In my anger I might have *implied* it," said Father Brian. "Did you hear what he just said about the 25th century? Well, it's when Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers fly in through the baptistery transom that yours truly hunts for the exits."

Father Kelly sighed. "Ah, God, is it *that* joke again?"

Father Brian felt the blood burn his cheeks.

"Joke? It's off and beyond that. For a month now it's Canaveral this, and trajectories and astronauts that. You'd think it was the Fourth of July, he's up half each night with the rockets. I mean, now, what kind of life is it, from midnight on, carousing about the dining-room with that Medusa machine which freezes your intellect if ever you stare at it? I cannot sleep for feeling the whole rectory will blast off any minute."

"Yes, yes," said Father Kelly. "But what's all this about the Pope?"

"Not the new one, the Pope just before," said Brian wearily. "Show him the clipping, Father Vittorini."

Father Vittorini brought forth a small press clipping and put it on the table.

Upside down, even, Father Brian could read the bad news:

POPE BLESSES ASSAULT ON SPACE

Father Kelly reached one finger out to touch the cutting gingerly.

Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Sept. 20th.

Pope Pius XII gave his blessing today to mankind's efforts to conquer space.

The Pontiff told delegates to the International Astronautical Congress, "God has no intention of setting a limit to the efforts of man to conquer space."

The four hundred delegates to the 22-nation congress were received by the Pope at his summer residence here.

"This Astronautic Congress has become one of great importance at this time of man's exploration of outer space," the Pope said. "It should concern all humanity . . . Man has

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to make the effort to put himself in new orientation with God and His universe."

Father Kelly's voice trailed off.

"When did this story appear?"

"In 1956."

"*That* long back?" Father Kelly snorted. "*I* didn't read it."

"It seems," said Father Brian, "you and I, Father, don't read much of anything."

"The point is," said Vittorini, "when first I spoke of this piece, grave doubts were cast on my veracity. Now we see I have cleaved close to the truth."

"Sure," said Father Brian quickly, "but as our poet William Blake put it:

> "*A truth that's told with bad intent*
> *Beats all the lies you can invent.*"

"Yes." Vittorini relaxed further into his amiability. "And didn't Blake also write:

> "*He who doubts from what he sees*
> *Will ne'er believe, do what you please.*
> *If the Sun and Moon should doubt,*
> *They'd immediately go out.*

"Most appropriate," added the Italian priest, "for the Space Age."

Father Brian stared at the outrageous man.

"I'll thank you not to quote our Blake to us."

"*Your* Blake?" said the slender pale man with the softly glowing dark hair. "Strange, I'd always thought him English—"

"The poetry of Blake," said Father Brian, "was always a great comfort to my mother. It was she told me there was Irish blood on his maternal side."

"I will graciously accept that," said Father Vittorini. "But, back to the newspaper story. Now that we've found it, it seems a good time to do some research on Pius the Twelfth's Encyclical."

Father Brian's wariness, which was a second set of nerves under his skin, prickled alert. "What Encyclical is that?"

"Why, the one on Space Travel."

"On Space Travel, a special Encyclical?"

"A special one."

Both Irish priests were near on to being flung back in their chairs by the blast.

Father Vittorini made the picky motions of a man cleaning up after a detonation, finding lint on his coatsleeve, a crumb or two of toast on the tablecloth.

"Wasn't it enough," said Brian in a dying voice, "he shook hands with the astronaut bunch and told them well done and

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all that, but he had to go on and write at length about it?"

"It was not enough," said Father Vittorini. "He wished, I hear, to comment further on the problems of life on other worlds, and its effect on Christian thinking—"

Each of these words, precisely spoken, drove the two other men farther back in their chairs.

"You *hear*?" said Father Brian. "You haven't read it yourself yet?"

"No, but I intend—"

"You intend everything and mean worse. Sometimes, Father Vittorini, you do not talk—and I hate to say this—like a priest of the Mother Church at all—"

"I talk," replied Vittorini, "like an Italian priest somehow caught and trying to preserve surface tension treading an ecclesiastical bog where I am outnumbered by a great herd of clerics named Shaughnessy and Nulty and Flannery that mill and stampede like caribou or bison every time I so much as whisper, 'Papal Bull.'"

"There is no doubt in my mind—" and here Father Brian squinted off in the general direction of the Vatican itself—"that it was you, if you could've been there, might've put the Holy Father up to this whole space-travel monkeyshines . . ."

"I?"

"You! It's you, is it not, certainly not us, that lugs in the magazines by the carload with the rocket ships on the shiny covers and the filthy green monsters with six eyes and seventeen gadgets chasing after half-draped females on some moon or other? You I hear late nights doing the countdowns from ten, nine, eight, on through to one, in tandem with the beast TV, so we lie aching as the dread concussions knock the fillings from our teeth. Between one Italian here, and another at Castel Gandolfo, may God forgive me, you've managed to depress the entire Irish clergy!"

"Peace," said Father Kelly at last, "both of you."

"And peace, one way or another I'll have." Father Brian took the envelope from his pocket.

"Put that away," said Father Kelly, sensing what must be in the envelope.

"Please give this to Monsignor Sheldon for me."

Father Brian rose heavily and peered about to find the door and some way out of the room. He was suddenly gone.

"Now see what you've done!" said Father Kelly.

Father Vittorini, truly shocked, had stopped eating. "But, Father, all along, I thought it was an amiable squabble, him playing it loud and me soft—"

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"Well, you've played it too long, and the blasted fun turned serious!" said Kelly. "Ah, you don't know William like I do. You've really torn him—"

"I'll do my best to mend—"

"You'll mend the seat of your pants! Get out of the way, this is my job now." Father Kelly grabbed the envelope off the table and held it up to the light. "The X-ray of a poor man's soul. Ah, God."

He hurried upstairs. "Father Brian?" he called. He slowed. "Father?" He tapped at the door. "William?"

In the dining-room alone once more, Father Vittorini remembered the last few flakes in his mouth. They now had no taste. It took him a long slow while to get them down.

It was only after lunch that Father Kelly cornered Father Brian in the dreary little garden behind the rectory, and handed back the envelope.

"Willy, I want you to tear this up. I won't have you quitting in the middle of the game. How long has all this gone on between you two?"

Father Brian sighed and held, but did not rip the envelope. "It sort of crept upon us. It was me at first spelling the Irish writers and him pronouncing the Italian operas. Then me describing the *Book of Kells* in Dublin and him touring me through the Renaissance. Thank God for small favours, he didn't discover the Papal Encyclical on the blasted space travelling sooner, or I'd have transferred myself to a monkery where the fathers keep silence as a vow. But even there, I fear, he'd follow and countdown the Canaveral blast-offs in sign language. What a devil's advocate that man would make!"

"Father!"

"I'll do penance for that, later. It's just this dark otter, this seal, he frolics with Church dogma as if it were a candystriped bouncy ball. It's all very well to have seals cavorting, but, I say, but don't mix them with the true fanatics, such as you and me! Excuse the pride, Father, but there does seem to be a variation on the true theme every time you get them piccolo players in amongst us harpers, and don't you agree?"

"What an enigma, Will. We of the Church should be examples for others on how to get along."

"Has anyone told Father Vittorini that?" mused Father Kelly.

"Well, are we priests or barbers? Do we stand here splitting hairs, or do we shave Vittorini close with his own razor? William, have you no plan?"

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"Perhaps to call in a Baptist to mediate."

"Be off with your Baptist! Have you researched the Encyclical?"

"The Encyclical?"

"Have you let grass grow between your toes since breakfast? You have! Let's read that space-travel edict! Memorise it, get it pat, then counter-attack the rocket man in his own territory! This way, to the library. What is it the youngsters cry these days? *Five, four, three, two, one, blast-off?*"

"Or the rough equivalent."

"Well, say the rough equivalent then, man. And follow me!"

Going into the library they met Monsignor Sheldon as he was coming out.

"It's no use," said the rector, smiling as he examined the fever in their faces. "You won't find it in there."

"Won't find what in there?" Father Brian saw the rector looking at the letter which was still glued to his fingers, and hid it away fast. "Won't find what, Monsignor?"

"A rocket ship is a trifle too large for our small quarters," said the rector in a poor try at the enigmatic.

"Has the Italian bent your ear then?" cried Father Kelly in dismay.

"No, but echoes have a way of ricocheting about the place. I came to do some checking, myself."

"Then," gasped Brian with relief, "you're on *our* side?"

Monsignor Sheldon's eyes became somewhat sad.

"Is there a side to this, Fathers?"

They all moved into the little library room where Father Brian and Father Kelly sat uncomfortably on the edges of the hard chairs.

Monsignor Sheldon remained standing, watchful of their discomfort.

"Now. Why are you afraid of Father Vittorini?"

"Afraid?" Father Brian seemed surprised at the word, and cried softly, "It's more like angry."

"One leads to the other," admitted Kelly, and continued, "you see, Father, it's mostly a small town in Tuscany shunting stones at Maynooth, which is, as you know, a few miles out from Dublin."

"I'm Irish," said the rector patiently.

"So you are, Father, and all the more reason we can't figure your great calm in this disaster," said Father Brian.

"I'm California Irish," said the rector.

He let this sink in. When it had gone to the bottom, Father Brian groaned miserably. "Ah. We *forgot*."

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And he looked at the rector and saw there the recent dark, the tan complexion of one who walked with his face like a sunflower to the sky, even here in Chicago, taking what little light and heat he could to sustain his colour and being. Here stood a man with the figure, still, of a badminton and tennis player under his tunic, and with the firm lean hands of the handball expert. In the pulpit, by the look of his arms moving in the air, you could see him swimming under warm California skies.

Father Kelly let forth one sound of laughter.

" Oh, the gentle ironies, the simple fates. Father Brian, here is our Baptist! "

" Baptist? " asked the rector.

" No offence, Monsignor, but we were off to find a mediator, and here you are, an Irishman from California, who has known the wintry blows of Illinois so short a time, you've still the look of rolled lawns and January sunburn. We, we were born and raised as lumps in Cork and Kilcock, Father. Twenty years in Hollywood would not thaw us out. And now, well, they do say, don't they, that California is much—" here he paused—" like Italy? "

" I see where you're driving," mumbled Father Brian.

Monsignor Sheldon nodded, his face both warm and gently sad. " My blood is like your own. But the climate I was shaped in is like Rome's. So you see, Father Brian, when I asked *are there any sides*, I spoke from my heart."

" Irish yet not Irish," mourned Father Brian. " Almost but not quite Italian. Oh, the world plays tricks with our flesh."

" Only if we let it, William, Patrick."

Father Brian and Father Kelly started a bit at the sound of their Christian names.

" You still haven't answered: why are you afraid? "

Father Brian watched his hands fumble like two bewildered wrestlers for a moment. " Why, it's because just when we get things settled on earth, just when it looks like victory's in sight, the Church on a good footing, along comes Father Vittorini—"

" Forgive me, Father," said the rector. " Along comes reality. Along comes space, time, entropy, progress, along come a million things, always. Vittorini didn't invent space travel."

" No, but he makes a good thing of it. With him, ' Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.' Well, no matter. I'll stash my shillelagh if he'll put away his rockets."

" No, let's leave them out in the open," replied the rector. " Best not hide violence or special forms of travel. Best to work with them. Why don't we climb in that rocket, Father, and learn from it? "

" Learn what? That most of the things we've taught in the

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past on Earth don't fit out there on Mars or Venus or wherever in Hell Vittorini would push us? Drive Adam and Eve out of some new Garden, on Jupiter, with our very own rocket fires? Or worse, find there's no Eden, no Adam, no Eve, no damned Apple or Serpent, no Fall, no Original Sin, no Annunciation, no nothing at all! on one blasted world tailing another? Is *that* what we must learn, Monsignor?"

"If need be, yes," said the rector. "It's the Lord's space and the Lord's worlds *in* space, Father. We must not try to take our cathedrals with us, when all we need is an overnight case. The Church can be packed in a box no larger than is needed for the articles of the Mass, as much as these hands can carry. Allow Father Vittorini this, the people of the southern climes learnt long ago to build in wax which melts and takes its shape in harmony with the motion and need of man. William, William, if you insist on building in hard ice, it will shatter when we break the sound barrier or melt and leave you nothing in the fire of the rocket blast."

"That," said Father Brian, "is a hard thing to learn at fifty years, Monsignor."

"But learn you will, I know you will," said the rector, touching his shoulder. "I set you a task: to make peace with the Italian priest. Find some way tonight, for a meeting of minds. Sweat at it, Father. And, first off, since our library is meagre, hunt for and find the Space Encyclical, so we'll know what we're yelling about."

A moment later, the rector was gone.

Father Brian listened to the dying sound of those swift feet, as if a white ball were flying high in the sweet blue air, and the rector was hurrying in for a final volley.

"Irish but not Irish," he said. "Almost but not quite Italian. And now what are we, Patrick?"

"I begin to wonder," was the reply.

And they went away to a larger library wherein might be hid the grander thoughts of a former Pope on a bigger space.

A long while after supper that night, in fact almost at bedtime, Father Kelly, sent on his mission, moved about the rectory tapping on doors and whispering.

Shortly before ten o'clock, Father Vittorini came down the stairs and gasped with surprise.

Father Brian, at the unused fireplace, warming himself at the small gas heater which stood on the hearth, did not turn for a moment.

A space had been cleared, and the brute television set moved

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forward into a circle of four chairs, among which stood two small tabourets on which stood two bottles and four glasses. Father Brian had done it all, allowing Kelly to do nothing. Now he turned, for Kelly and Monsignor Sheldon were arriving. The rector stood in the dining area and surveyed the room. "Splendid." He paused and added, "I think. Let me see now . . ." He read the label on one bottle. "Father Vittorini is to sit here."

"By the Irish moss?" asked Vittorini.

"The same," said Father Brian.

Vittorini, much pleased, sat.

"And the rest of us will sit by the Lachryma Christi, I take it?" said the rector.

"An *Italian* drink, Monsignor."

"I think I've heard of it," said the rector, and sat.

"Here." Father Brian hurried over and, without looking at Vittorini, poured his glass a good way up with the moss. "An Irish transfusion."

"Allow me." Vittorini nodded his thanks and rose, in turn, to pour the other drinks. "The tears of Christ and the sunlight of Italy," he said. "And now, before we drink, I have something to say."

The others waited, looking at him.

"The Papal Encyclical on Space Travel," he said at last, "does not exist."

"We discovered that," said Kelly, "a few hours ago."

"Forgive me, Fathers," said Vittorini. "I am like the fisherman on the bank who, seeing fish, throws out more bait. I suspected, all along, that there was no Encyclical. But every time it was brought up, about town, I heard so many priests from Dublin deny it existed, I came to think it *must*! They would not go check the item, for they feared its reality. I would not, in my pride, do research, for I feared it *did not* exist. So, Roman pride or Cork pride, it's all the same. I shall go on retreat soon and be silent for a week, Father, and do penance."

"Good, Father, good." Monsignor Sheldon rose. "Now, I've a small announcement. A new priest arrives here next month. I've thought long on it. The man is Italian, born and raised in Montreal."

Vittorini closed one eye and tried to picture this man to himself.

"If the Church must be all things to all people," said the rector, "I am intrigued with the thought of hot blood raised in a cold clime as this new Italian was, even as I find it fascinating to consider myself: cold blood raised in California. We've

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needed another Italian here to shake things up, and this Latin looks to be the sort that will shake even Father Vittorini. Now, will someone offer a toast?"

"May I, Monsignor?" Father Vittorini rose again, smiling gently, his eyes darkly aglow. He raised his glass. "Somewhere did Blake not speak of the Machineries of Joy? That is, did not God promote environments, then intimidate those natures by provoking the existence of flesh, toy men and women, such as are we all? And thus happily sent forth, at our best, with good grace and fine wit, on calm noons, in fair climes, are we not God's Machineries of Joy?"

"If Blake said that," said Father Brian, "I take it all back. He never lived in Dublin!"

All laughed together.

Vittorini drank the Irish moss and was duly speechless.

The others drank the Italian wine and grew mellow and, in his mellowness, Father Brian cried softly, "Vittorini, now, will you, unholy as it is, tune on the ghost?"

"Channel nine?"

"Nine it is!"

And while Vittorini dialled the knobs, Father Brian mused over his drink, "Did Blake *really* say that?"

"The fact is, Father," said Vittorini, bent to the phantoms coming and going on the screen, "he might have, if he'd lived today. I wrote it myself, just an hour ago. If it sounds mechanistic and against Church doctrine, remember I love to entertain such thoughts. To entertain does not mean I give them a lifetime's lodging. I let thoughts come and go, as they will. Shelter for the night is the least we can give any wild sweet tramp Idea."

All watched the Italian with some awe. Then the TV gave a hum and came clear, showing a rocket, a long way off, getting ready.

"The machineries of joy," said Father Brian. "Is that one of them you're tuning in? And is that another, sitting there, the rocket, on its stand?"

"It could be, tonight," murmured Vittorini. "If the thing goes up, and a man in it, all round the world, and him still alive, and us with him, though we just sit here. That would be joyful indeed."

The rocket was getting ready, and Father Brian shut his eyes for a moment. Forgive me, Jesus, he thought, forgive an old man his prides, and forgive Vittorini his spites, and help me to understand what I see here tonight, and let me stay awake if need be, in good humour, until dawn, and let the thing go well, going up and

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coming down, and think of the man in that contraption, Jesus, *think* of and be with him. And help me through the summer and into fall and winter, for sure as Fate, on some strange, mad and unknown holidays such as Guy Fawkes or your Chinese New Year, there will be Vittorini and the kids from around the block, on the rectory lawn, lighting skyrockets. All of them there watching the sky, like the morn of the Redemption, and help me, O Lord, to be as those children before the great night of Time and Void where you abide. And help me to walk forward, Lord, to light the next rocket, Independence Night, and stand with the Latin father, my face suffused with that same look of the delighted child in the face of the burning glories you put near our hand and bid us savour.

He opened his eyes.

Voices from far Canaveral were crying in a wind of Time. Strange phantom powers loomed upon the screen. He was drinking the last of the wine when someone touched his elbow gently.

"Father," said Vittorini, near. "Fasten your seat belt."

"I will," said Father Brian. "And many thanks."

He sat back in his chair. He closed his eyes. He waited for the thunder. He waited for the fire. He waited for the concussion and the voice that would teach a silly, a strange, a wild, a miraculous thing:

How to count back, ever backward . . . to zero.

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MOMENT IN TIME

I look out now upon the lawns and sombre trees
And see the shades of yesterday return,
The heavy homeward ploughing of the bees,
The rabbits scuttering in the tangled fern.

The single stars come out above the pointed firs,
The moon lifts up her silver looking-glass,
The glow-worms are night's gleaming harbingers,
And mushrooms shine like manna on the grass.

I hold the clock of dandelion in my hand
And blow away all lagging time and care,
As silently across the stubbled land
The starling squadrons ride the timeless air.

LEONARD CLARK

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WILD FISH PUT ON AIRS

BY ROLAND PERTWEE

FORASMUCH as my mother was denied the satisfaction of spawning in the gravel of a river bed and having it fertilised by a husband of her own choice, my birth cannot be described as natural. It occurred at the Larne Valley Fishery which reared brown trout for restocking rivers, with a sideline in rainbows for the table. Here, having been lifted from a stock pond where she spent a comfortable and sheltered life, the spawn was stripped from her into a pie dish by rude but gentle hands. My father, with whom she had no personal acquaintance, was subjected to similar treatment and that was that.

The dish was then emptied into a shallow tray over which trickled water from a spring and where, together with my future brothers and sisters, I enjoyed a period of oblivion. My earliest memory was of an enormous face looming over the tray and of a voice baying, " Some of these eggs are eyed already."

Although instinctively cautious, I lacked a deeply-rooted suspicion of mankind that would have been mine had I been born in the wild. For in a fishery no man's hand was against me and, while still lacking any means of defending myself, I was also immune from the danger of being gobbled up by an eel, a salmon parr, or even some member of my own race.

The Fishery occupied part of a water meadow, having a hatchery shed and nine ponds of different sizes watered by a stream which flowed through the whole system and returned to the river half a mile below its point of entry.

But let us return to my nursery tray where, one morning, following a sensation that I was going to burst—I did burst; a head sprouting from one end of me and a tail from the other. Although not much more than half an inch long, I would have been a handsome little fellow but for a globular appendage on my underside known as a yolk-sac. In providing us with this source of pre-digested food when too young to forage for ourselves, Nature knew what she was up to, but, if practical, this travelling larder was unsightly and I was thankful when it disappeared.

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Had I been in natural surroundings at this stage of my development the problem of survival would have been acute. Particles of food small enough for an alevin to absorb are not too plentiful in an open river and many misfortunes and disasters are encountered by those in search of them. My state was the more blessed for, with the disappearance of the yolk-sac, I was transferred to a trough where, at suitable times of day, the water was clouded with easily assimilated nutriment. Here was life at its simplest, with nothing to do but to stick around and suck in what was provided for our delectation. The trough was small and very crowded, but as none of us was much bigger than a pin and we shared a common liking for huddling together on the bottom, no one complained on that account.

Those early days were passed in the half-darkness of the hatchery and it was a startling experience when we were declared sizeable enough to be swilled into a bucket and emptied into the Number One pond reserved for fingerlings. This, I remember, was covered by a portable frame of wire-netting, and haunted by a small bird with brilliant blue plumage who watched us greedily until something went *phumph* and he was dead.

There was always more than enough to go round. But there is a certain monotony about life in a stew pond which, as we grew older, we sought to combat by splashing and jostling at mealtimes as though it was only by so doing that our appetites could be satisfied.

It was not until we were yearlings, with a larger pond in which to disport ourselves, that sinister happenings would sometimes occur. For during the hurly-burly while we were being fed, a large net might be intruded beneath us and a quantity of my brothers and sisters scooped out, counted, and dropped into a portable tank that, bubbling mysteriously, was dispatched to some undisclosed destination. Having no means of knowing that they would be released in a river that needed restocking, the reason for these raids came in for a good deal of uneasy speculation.

Some of us, now yearlings, went to restock the river responsible for our water supply, for the native population had been sadly diminished when the building of salmon steps at the hitherto impassable Atherton Weir resulted in such hoards of salmon parr appearing in the upper reaches that the native trout were hard pressed to get a living.

That I escaped being exported to this or any other river was traceable to judgment rather than to luck, for whenever I saw the owner approaching, with the food pail in one hand and a net in the other, I took no part in the unseemly rush towards him,

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but remained on the outskirts until the scoop had been made.

Apart from these raids, I shall not readily forget an encounter with a heron which all but ended my career. I still bear the scar left by his beak from a near miss on my starboard side. The shock brought me gasping to the surface from which the Fishery owner netted me out. I expected to be knocked on the head and tossed aside, but having decided I had a chance of pulling through he held me in the stream between two pools, where the bubbly water flowing through my gills put new life in me. I was, indeed, so full of buck that, as he was carrying me back to where I belonged, I leapt out of his hand into the Number Nine pool reserved for three-year-olds.

Here my companions, not so numerous, but much larger, did not hesitate to keep me in my place. Although our rations were more plentiful, they were harder to come by and no one made it his business to see that I got my share. What I lacked in years I made up for in agility, and many a tasty morsel of liver was snatched from under the maws of my elders and betters.

The demand for large trout was limited so the net was seldom in evidence. In consequence we grew fat, idle, and a thought incautious. Being younger and less willing to settle down than my fellows, I sometimes wondered if the life we were living was not grossly artificial. Such thoughts may have been an inheritance from my forebears who made their own way in the world and were not herded together in a confined area. Trout are not gregarious and I found in myself a growing desire for a wider horizon, for solitude, and for a place of my own.

When I leapt high enough, I could see the river threading through the valley and imagine the infinite variety of delights it must have to offer. I saw it tumbling over rocks, or still as a June sky. I saw the dreamy water-glides among islands of weeds that were ringed by rising fish.

Number Nine pool was the last in the Fishery and at its base the water flowed through a daily combed grille into a channel that returned it to the river. That grille was an iron curtain that denied me access to the freedom which lay beyond. The bars, of course, were too close together for a fish of my size to penetrate, but I took to haunting the place in the hope that one day I would find myself on the other side. And one day I did.

That morning we had felt vibrations from barking, baying, and heavy footfalls, and we knew that hounds and men were hunting an otter; a sport for which I had the liveliest approval. For these murderous creatures would sometimes enter the Fishery at night and take toll of our lustiest members. To see an otter by day was most unusual, and our alarm may be imagined

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when a singularly large one dived into the head of the pool and, swimming under water beneath a tell-tale line of bubbles from escaping breath, made for the grille at the lower end. Before he reached it, several couples of hounds were splashing through the pool almost on top of him. On the bank, the Fishery owner, brandishing a net, was expostulating with the Master and members of the hunt. "If those damn dogs bring down that grille," he shouted, "I could lose heaven knows how many pounds' worth of fish!"

With their quarry in view, there was nothing the Master or anyone else could do to restrain the pack.

I was less than a yard away when the otter eeled past me and, scrambling up the sheer bank with the teeth of a hound narrowly missing his rudder, was into the stream and away before you could say alevin. The hounds that had not taken to the water were after him in hot pursuit. The swimmers tried to get up the bank, breaking it down in places, and wailing with despair when their efforts failed. One old hound, who had seen the otter plunge into the stream, attacked the grille with such ferocity that a rusty bar was dislodged from its housing, leaving a gap wide enough for him to thrust his nose through. The owner swiped him away with the net and, a moment after, clapped it over the hole, but between the one action and the other I was through the grille and my captivity was at an end.

I freely confess to suffering a feeling of uncertainty as the fast-running current carried me to the point where the stream was reunited with the river. This feeling turned to panic when I realised that news of my escape had become common knowledge. Armed with steel-shod sticks, and stretched across the shallows from bank to bank, stood a line of men, clearly resolved to prevent me getting by at any cost. I have since been told that their purpose was to turn the otter, but, if so, I had no means of knowing it and, unwilling to hasten my end, I made a swift about-turn and flashed upstream through chuckling shallows that ended in the tail of a long, dark pool.

I came to rest beneath the shelter of an overhanging bank. In choosing this spot I was less than lucky, for I pulled up within a fin's breadth of the otter who, with nothing but his nose above the surface, was taking a much needed breather. He lay so still that I mistook him for a log, until the baying of a hound stirred him to renewed activity and startled the wits out of me.

When my fright had abated and all was peace, I began to take stock of my surroundings. It was the time of day when, normally, I would have been attracted by the rattle of the dinner

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pail. Although more than ready for a snack, this welcome sound was not to be heard. In the event, I decided that I was in need of local information and took steps to obtain it.

A few yards further on, a trout less than half my size was dimpling the surface by sucking in some kind of smut not worth bothering about. Although an insignificant figure, his scales appeared to be speckled with reddish spots which you will not find on trout reared by hand. These spots, which betoken a wild upbringing, are a source of great pride to their possessors and provoke in them a regrettable tendency to put on airs.

The fish I now approached was eyeing me with a mixture of contempt and hostility that savoured of impertinence.

"Yes? Well? What is it?" he snapped.

Being unwilling so soon to throw my weight about, I replied civilly enough, "I wanted to ask what time you get it."

"Get what?"

"Dinner, of course."

He gave me a pitying look. "How in nature am I supposed to answer that? You'll get it if and when there's a midday hatch of olive or iron blue dun. If there isn't, you'll wait till evening when there may be a fall of spinner—if the weather holds, which it doesn't look like doing."

I told him I was not interested in chasing waterflies, but in when the man came round with a pail of horse liver or something a trout could get his teeth into.

Red Spot, astonished, exclaimed, "So that's the answer! You're one of the pampered breed from that hatchery. I should have guessed it at once because you would never have grown that fat by your own unaided efforts; and you've no wild spots on you. I met some of your lot last spring when the new tenant put a hundred yearlings in Highleigh Pool and gave the old cannibal who patrols it the feast of a lifetime. Talk about ignorance! I thought salmon parr took the prize for silliness, but that hatchery lot waffling around looking for trouble had 'em licked all ends up. And now, to crown everything, you appear, asking when to expect a man with a dinner pail!"

Unaccustomed to being treated with such discourtesy, I retorted, "If your remarks are typical of river manners, I congratulate myself on having grown up among persons of refinement. Obviously, most of what you said was sheer nonsense, for without the provision of regular meals, it would be impossible to attain even such miserable proportions as yours. I can only assume that you are too young to know better and wish you good day."

"Hold on and let's have less of that 'too young' stuff," he

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replied. "If you had wits enough to read my scales, you'd know I've been in this river five years. In fact, I was here two years before you were born. I don't know who was daft enough to restock a fast, stony-bottomed waterway with fish of your size, but I do know it will be a miracle if you don't starve to death."

After the hopes I had entertained about the joys of freedom, his words made dismal hearing, nor were my spirits raised by the knowledge that the wretched specimen who addressed me was my senior. Until then I had not realised that trout grow big, not as a result of their years but of the amount of provender they consume. It followed, therefore, that Red Spot's lack of size lent colour to his statement that regular and substantial meals were no part of life in the river.

A melancholy acceptance of these facts must have been reflected in my looks for, adopting a bantering tone, he said, "Don't despair, for even though dinner pails may belong to the past, alluring forms of refreshment are sometimes offered by gentlemen carrying long wavy canes, who kneel reverently on the bank while casting these titbits upon the water. Should you be tempted to accept one, it may comfort you to know that every fish in the vicinity will be tickled to death that an oversized intruder no longer is competing for his daily bread."

As these remarks, which he clearly regarded as funny, meant nothing to me, I was unable to find a suitable reply and, weary and dejected, I steered a course upstream. The monotony of my previous surroundings now appeared infinitely preferable to conditions where there was no certainty whatever when the next meal would be forthcoming.

On my dreary way upstream, I paused to inspect many pleasant little bays sheltered by alders, any one of which I would gladly have occupied, but each had a tenant who, in no single instance, indicated that there might be room for two. Although I had at first been pushed about a bit in Number Nine, the experience was not sufficient to convince me how grossly selfish and possessive individual trout can be. Their lack of concern for the welfare of anyone but themselves was positively disgusting, and left me with the poorest possible opinion of the whole species.

After repeated disappointments and setbacks, I reached a spot where the river narrowed and cascaded over a sprawl of rocks. This was my first experience of swimming against a strong current and it was most exhilarating. Halfway through the rapids, encouraged by the capture of a small worm, I paused for reflection behind a rock, but was so pestered by silly questions from, and the antics of, salmon parr that I did not linger.

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The rapids ended by a concrete groin or croy which deflected some of the river water into the stream which supplied the Fishery. Of this, I was ignorant or I might have been tempted to follow it and seek readmission. Instead, I pursued my way to a stretch of wider, quieter water that was largely deserted. Here I stationed myself behind a waterlogged and submerged bough of a tree, resolved that anyone who disputed my right to be there should catch it.

Since I was not looking for a row, I eased my way through the smaller branches and fetched up beside a long, cylindrical rock which provided admirable cover for my left flank. The rock had a smooth, slimy surface that was most agreeable to rub against. With more experience of life in a river, I might have thought this was rather odd. In my ignorance, I cheerfully accepted it, and would have continued to do so, had I not observed that the pointed end of the rock was opening and shutting in a manner inconsistent with the conduct of inanimate objects. Simultaneously I perceived a glassy eye almost as large as my entire face. What I had taken for a rock was a fish so enormous as to defy description!

I did not doubt that he was the largest fish in the world and, in all probability, the most ferocious. That it would only be a matter of seconds before the jaws opened and closed upon me so paralysed my nerves that I besought the monster for mercy. "Sir," I faltered, "I am a stranger in these parts, innocent of the wish to trespass upon your privacy or deprive you of the sustenance of which so mighty a fish must be constantly in need. Since joining the river early this morning, my lack of wits has come under such heavy fire that I believe it more than likely that I would prove most indigestible fare. I beseech you to accept my apologies and give me a minute's start."

To my astonishment his reply could hardly have been more amiable. "As my friends in a Scots river might say," he chuckled, "ye've nae cause to fash yourself, laddie. For we salmon live on the fat accumulated during our time in the sea, and only come here to perpetuate our species.

"Although I may appear terrible to you, no one more harmless than myself can be found in a river. You are welcome to all the start you need and the sooner you take it the better, for a jumpy fellow like you might betray my hiding-place and I have no desire for a poacher to sneak up from behind and slip a rabbit-wire over my tail—a fate which recently befell a hen fish in whose future activities I had intended to play an important part."

Thanking him profusely, I lost no time in making myself scarce. Nothing is more miserable than ignorance, want of

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experience, or inability to cope. From all of these I was a sufferer, and apart from one paltry worm, I had eaten nothing all day.

With the approach of evening, it began to rain. If Red Spot were to be believed, that meant there would be no fall of spinner and I was confronting the prospect of spending the night with an empty belly, when I saw a man who carried a long and wavy cane.

The rain was coming down in earnest, and he paused to struggle into an oilskin, intending, no doubt, to get under cover. In the circumstances, the likelihood of his offering me any of those refreshments, of which Red Spot had spoken, seemed remote. But I had learnt at the Fishery that, wet or fine, man is a trout's best friend, and there was no reason to suppose that this one differed from the rest. I therefore appealed to him for aid by performing a most spectacular leap. The result was electrifying, for without waiting to button his oilskins, he snatched up the cane, waggled it furiously in the air and deposited a handsome-looking fly in the very centre of the ring I had just made; but before I could reach it, the mischievous fellow whipped it away and denied me the chance. Not wanting him to think I couldn't take a joke, I leapt again and, touched by the confidence reposed in him, he made another cast. This time I was resolved there should be no mistake and so was he.

As my mouth fastened on his offering, there was a blinding flash, followed by the loudest roar of thunder imaginable. Then the sluices of the sky opened and the river surface was alive with dancing raindrops. But worse was to come, for my attempt to get under cover was restrained by a vicious tugging at my jaw which, in one place, pricked most damnably. The efforts made to free myself did not avail. But, while near the surface, I saw that the cane was bent into an arch which reflected every movement I made.

How long the battle lasted I do not know, nor did I grasp the fact that the man had me, so to speak, on a string. When I headed downstream and saw him pelting along after me, I knew that I was not so much the victim of man's duplicity as of my own dunderheadedness in believing what, with malice aforethought, that crimson-spotted, double-dyed villain of a wild fish had told me.

Some tardily developed defence mechanism led me to seek refuge among the branches of the submerged bough already described and, as before, I fetched up alongside my friend the salmon. But now his apparent lethargy had departed and he was all of a tremble with excitement. He must have seen

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whatever had pricked my jaw, for he said, "I was afraid your chances of survival were small and am sorry there is nothing I can do about it, but the river's rising and I must get upstream without delay."

By then I was almost spent from the constant strain imposed upon me, and I knew that if it persisted much longer I would be showing the yellow underbelly of defeat. That would have been my end, had not the salmon, in the eagerness of his departure, thwacked his tail across the gossamer strand which restrained me and snapped it at the knot.

In that exquisite moment of freedom, I spun, topsy-turvy, to the surface, only to be enveloped in a rushing wall of water brought about by a cloudburst upstream. In my weakened state, I was powerless to resist and was borne upon the crest of a wave which struck the croy with such force that it is a wonder it remained standing. No doubt I would, at that moment, have perished had not the squeezed water acted as a cushion that saved me from being crushed against the masonry.

Having missed death by inches, I was swept, right-handed, into the stream that supplied the Fishery. If that spate had been a foot higher, it would have swamped everything and scattered fish, great and small, all over the meadow, but it only remained in being long enough to top and sweep away the wire cover of the small Number One section where I had started life as a fingerling.

Here, when the river fell, I was found next morning by the owner and netted out for inspection.

"But I've handled this beggar before," he declared, "when he was beaked by a heron and since then he's collected a Wickham's Fancy in the lower jaw."

His assistant said, "Yes, I remember. He jumped out of your hand into Number Nine. But how in blazes did he get out of it?"

"It must have been when the hound dislodged that rail," said the owner, "and in twenty-four hours he's made the full circle, leaving by the back door and coming in at the front. I reckon that a trout with that much individuality deserves a break, so pop him in a can, and run him along to the stock pond to join the dads and mums."

The stock pond is a little mere in an oak copse. It is bubbling with natural springs and abounds with freshwater shrimp and snail. Here, in company with persons of and for breeding, I shall peacefully spend the rest of my life, except for an annual visit to the Fishery where, whether I like it or not, I must do my bit towards ensuring a continuation of the species.

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" Well, that's about it, baby ! We spawn right here or we don't spawn at all."

Drawing by Ed Fisher

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MADAME PINEAU'S THREE SCREAMS

BY DAVID E. WALKER

IT became known, jokingly, of course, as "the night that Madame Pineau saw the murder," and the cream of the joke was that Madame Pineau should have fainted.

In these little Normandy villages that lie along the Channel coast, a weakness of this kind is almost unheard of. And that Madame P. of all people, known to the whole parish as a determined, pious, and sober creature, should have collapsed like that in the rhododendrons, and on a Sunday evening when she was wearing her black dress and black hat, well, that made it more laughable still. From Pourville to Trouville the story spread, and the only person who did not laugh from the very beginning was Edward Lawson, the Englishman who found her.

He had been taking his black Labrador, Bess, for an evening stroll through the raw sea mist and had turned off the main Dieppe/Saint-Valéry road down one of the many side turnings, a sunken lane twisting illogically between ploughed fields, when he heard a scream near the empty cottage known as Le Petit Moulin, The Little Mill. The cry was so thin it could even have come from a seagull, but as he passed the gate leading to the garden of Le Petit Moulin, he saw the round figure on the path by the rhododendrons. He climbed the gate and carried Madame Pineau the hundred yards back to her own cottage, where numerous young Pineaux quickly brought her round.

Her story was simple. She had been walking home along the lane when she saw a large man, "a veritable bull of a man," rush out from the empty cottage after a girl she could only describe as young and slim, stab her with "a great knife" till she fell on to the grass beneath the apple trees, then pick up the body and start stumbling up the path towards the rhododendrons. Unwilling to believe her own eyes, Madame Pineau went straight into the garden. She knew, this being Sunday evening, that many men of the neighbourhood would have drunk too much Calvados, the fiery apple brandy of the region, and if it was still

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possible to avert a tragedy, then it was plainly her duty to do so.

But it was not until she reached the fringe of the rhododendrons that she suddenly became certain the garden was empty. Although it was a large garden, she knew every inch of it, for she had worked there for the French couple who had originally owned the cottage. All the shutters of Le Petit Moulin were closed, as they had been for more than a year. The silence was complete.

It was in that silence, which had wrapped itself clammily round her shoulders, that Madame Pineau, plump, robust, practical, and in her Sunday best, had fainted.

As she lay on her narrow bed in her own cottage, her pale blue eyes looking straight at Ted Lawson, she even remembered to apologise for the trouble she had caused. Already her family had begun to joke about it and were trying to make her take a glass of Calvados. Lawson patted her shoulder and went out.

He returned at once to Le Petit Moulin. First, he was anxious to make quite sure that Madame Pineau had not been dreaming. He examined the path, the flowerbeds, the locked doors of the cottage, and the rhododendron bushes. The ground was damp enough to convince him that only he and Madame Pineau had been there recently. Her tiny footmarks and his own immense ones were clear enough, and there was nothing else.

His second anxiety was the temporary disappearance of the Labrador, Bess. She usually stayed to heel wherever he went and whatever he was doing. He called her name softly and became aware of a dark shadow near the gate. He moved down the path, and there she was, belly to ground, hackles up, in mortal terror. She was shivering all over. He talked to her for a bit, put her on the lead, and started home. Only when they reached the main road did she calm down.

Now darkness was almost complete, and he was glad to see the lights of his own cottage shining against the black mass of the fir trees behind it. A distant, almost comforting rumble proved that the Channel was still running high in spite of the chill mist.

The door led straight to the kitchen, and as he stepped into the light, he saw Mary preparing supper.

"Nice walk?" she said, without turning. He kissed the back of her head where the curls stopped. She was in the shabby jeans she used for painting.

Bess went straight to her bowl and began drinking avidly; her tail was up again, and she seemed normal. He poured out a glass of Calvados from the big jar in the front room, swallowed it at a gulp, and poured himself another, quietly. He was disturbed about the dog.

Not until they had eaten supper before the log and pine-cone

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fire in the front room did he tell Mary the story. It was all quite a joke, he explained. Madame Pineau fainting, of all people! It would be the laugh of the village for weeks.

"I'm not worried about people fainting," Mary said dryly, "and I still think we ought to take that cottage, haunted or not. It's miles warmer than this wretched little icebox. Just *you* try painting in this cottage on a day like this! I can hardly hold a brush. I'm getting a bit tired of living on the edge of frostbite."

To avoid an immediate reply, he looked round at his wife's canvases, strewed around the room, and the four framed ones on the walls. He knew more about stocks than about art, but people who knew had said she was going to be good. He was accustomed to joking that she would be able to keep him in his old age by selling her pictures. As he was now twenty-eight and Mary was twenty-three, there was still time.

But now this trivial business of finding a better and warmer room as a studio was beginning to worm itself between them. He would try to get a stove or something. It was true the fire warmed only one corner and belched smoke abominably when the wind was in the east. He decided to omit the rest of the story, particularly about Bess. You don't have to tell your wife everything, and in any case she didn't much care for the dog.

"What time are you off tomorrow?" she asked.

"Usual six or so. Anything you want from the Ville Lumière?"

By starting at six each Monday morning, he was able to reach his Paris office by nine. On Friday evening he would be back, to look at the new paintings, produce some presents, make love, relax.

There were times when he felt that perhaps he should take Mary up to Paris more often. She kept saying she wanted to go. But Paris meant dinners, theatres, shopping, and they simply hadn't the money for it yet. It was another of the small, unsolved questions that nagged at them.

At eleven o'clock he gave Bess a last scamper through the wet woods, then tidied the fire for the night. When he climbed the creaking wooden staircase to their bedroom, he found Mary had already gone to bed and was pretending to be asleep.

This part of the story came to be known as "when Madame Pineau screamed the first time."

She screamed again, this tubby little practical French widow, exactly four Sundays later.

Spring was now on the way, and one soon learnt that Le Petit Moulin had been let. The news caused widespread speculation

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—would it be an American officer, a French industrialist from Rouen, a wealthy Parisian installing his *poule* for the summer, an English couple, or what?

Madame Pirodet sniffed the air, hoping they would need much laundry done, Monsieur le Curé rubbed his hands and dreamed of his impoverished fifteenth-century church, while at the general store, the butcher's, the shoemaker's hut, and even as far as the tiny hotel in Pourville, there was an air of genial expectation. Not, of course, that these good people of Normandy were robbers, but as they themselves never tired of pointing out, one must live, one must earn one's crust.

For Madame Pineau, the news was particularly welcome. Working for the people at Le Petit Moulin had always been her right, and with so many little Pineaux to feed, the money would be most welcome. Somehow word got around that the arrival would be by car, on the Sunday evening. Many of the villagers chose to include the sunken lane in their evening stroll.

All conjectures turned out to be false. From the trim little Renault stepped a large, grinning Dutchman, very red in the face, and behind him a slim and lovely girl—quite possibly, the villagers reluctantly admitted, his wife. Madame Pineau had taken up her station at the door of Le Petit Moulin, rubbing bony, welcoming hands on her apron and already bobbing and bowing in the direction of the car.

But as the Dutchman strode up the path, past the rhododendrons, she screamed. This came to be known as "Madame Pineau's second scream." She did not faint but stood there, a terrible and puzzled defiance in her round blue eyes, her crinkled little mouth wide open. Then she threw the keys on the gravel path and ran from the scene.

It was after Madame Pineau's second scream that people in Sainte-Marguerite stopped laughing and the first rustle of impending tragedy was felt. While it was well known that old Pineau had often beaten his wife when he was alive, it was still admitted she was a serious and unafraid little person and by no means one to be trifled with. She was as regular at church as she was with her bills, a true Norman. And now here she was, thumping her fist on the table and declaring the Dutchman was the fellow she had seen murdering his wife.

Monsieur le Curé was approached. Would he exorcise the cottage? Would he warn the young wife? Would he speak to the Dutchman, ask him to leave? What *would* he do?

But Monsieur le Curé, a practical priest from the Midi, learnt after the briefest inquiry the Dutchman was not of his faith; and high as he rated Madame Pineau among his parishioners, he

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could scarcely, on her evidence alone, use holy water on Le Petit Moulin.

Monsieur le Maire shrugged his shoulders and sided with the priest: these were foreigners, and not to be interfered with unless there was cause or provocation.

It became a collective responsibility, though many felt bitterly that the curé and the mayor had shirked their duty. Madame Lalande, the postmistress, was loudest in saying someone should warn the young wife at once and this was indeed a job for the police; but old Taitbout, taking off his peaked cap to scratch his head, retorted he was called after a crime, not before it.

The whole village was sorry for the girl, but she looked so happy. Why ruin her happiness because of something that might well have been a mere hallucination?

"Well, anyway, let's meet them," Mary said one evening in the Lawson cottage. "New people round here are a welcome change. Go and ask them in for a drink."

After a long silence, Ted Lawson blurted it out. "Look here," he said, "there's one detail I didn't tell you about the original night. Bess was with me. Something *did* happen there that you and I don't understand. Her hackles went up, and she was shivering all over. I'm not the fanciful type, but I don't like it."

"All the more reason to have them in," said Mary. "If the girl is in some kind of danger, which I don't believe, let's meet her and have a look at her. *And* at him."

She gave a laugh just half a tone higher than normal. "The gay, social round," she added. "Nothing like it."

Jan Leyden was indeed "a veritable bull of a man," and Berthe's slim figure was dwarfed by his bulk. They came for drinks, stayed for a meal, and left late. Excusing himself, Lawson went out to the kennel: the Labrador was standing at the end of her chain, silent, hackles bristling, and something he had never seen before, her teeth bared in a silent, almost maniac snarl.

Ted Lawson found it increasingly difficult to look the Dutchman in the face. Jan was a heavy drinker, but then it was understood that all Dutchmen drank heavily. And was it imagination or was it fact that Berthe was not by any means as happy as her manner tried to convey?

Through those spring weekends, they came to know each other better. Squeezed into the baby Renault, they drove inland to the woods that line the Paris road or along the white, winding lanes behind the coast, stopping off, at Jan's insistence, at wayside bistros to "test" the various local brands of Calvados. The

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Dutchman professed himself a connoisseur of painting, would seize the brush from Mary's hand, and with a cry of "*So*, it should be *so*!" would correct her landscapes.

"The strange thing is," Mary would say, gazing at the canvas intently, "you're absolutely right. Thank you."

"And another thing I shall teach you, Mary," the Dutchman declared. "Bring round some night any of the four pictures on your front-room walls, and I shall teach you tricks about the varnishing you would not learn elsewhere. There is a secret in this few artists know."

One night when they were alone in their cottage, Mary said, "You know, Ted, I think Berthe is a fool, a fool and possibly a coward into the bargain. I've been seeing something of her during the weekdays, when you and Jan are up in Paris, and she's been talking about Jan. She doesn't know how to handle him. She's scared. It seems that before they were married he used to have drinking bouts and he went pretty mad, didn't know at all what he was doing, and now she has a presentiment he's slipping back a bit. What she doesn't understand is that Jan is an artist. Their trouble is she simply doesn't talk his language."

Ted gazed into the empty fireplace.

The implication was fairly obvious: he for his part didn't talk Mary's language. In a quiet and rather prosaic way, he simply loved her.

"If that girl doesn't take care," Mary went on, "she *will* land into trouble and old Madame Pineau's hallucination will become fact, after all. A man drunk on Calvados becomes a lunatic, a blind, irresponsible animal. Now, don't laugh at me if I tell you the only way he can be saved is through art, through painting, through something outside himself. And Berthe will never succeed. She may even be murdered before she has a chance to succeed. She doesn't even know how to set about it . . . Usual six-o'clock start tomorrow?"

"Bit earlier, actually," said Ted. "Let's make coffee now."

Madame Pineau had found a woman from Quiberville to work in her place at Le Petit Moulin. The villagers had begun to shun the Dutchman and his wife, as if aware tragedy hung over the house. But at the butcher's, the general store, the little hotel, they went out of their way to be sympathetic to Berthe, always longing to give her a warning, yet never quite daring to interfere.

The whole neighbourhood by now realised the man was not normal. But he was a good spender, a man who paid cash, and there was nothing definite one could hold against him.

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Regularly, in the centuries-old church, Madame Pineau, kneeling against the worm-eaten wooden pews, prayed that what she had seen had been some kind of evil dream, divorced from reality, present or future.

It was in July—again a Sunday—that Madame Pineau screamed for the third—and last—time.

Ted Lawson had been out on one of his long walks with the Labrador and had decided to return by the lane leading past Le Petit Moulin, if only to discover whether Bess had learnt to pass it without cringing.

It was late evening but not altogether dark; there was neither sea mist nor seagulls to remind him of Madame Pineau's first experience. But—and it gave him a sudden shock he couldn't explain—there was Madame Pineau!

"Good evening, Madame Pineau." He tried to smile. "Why are you here?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Something is wrong."

Then they heard the sounds from Le Petit Moulin. As he ran to the gate, he saw the enormous Dutchman emerging in the half light behind the girl.

In the deepening dusk, the flash of the knife was sharp and clear, and the girl fell.

Lawson rushed up the path, but already Jan was forcing his way through the rhododendrons. He could hear Madame Pineau making sobbing noises behind him, and shouted to her, "You look after Berthe, Madame Pineau."

Jan was outstripping him, heading towards the woods in a direction that led to the Lawson cottage where, hours before, Ted had left Mary painting.

Swinging left, with the Labrador beside him, Lawson took the short cut to his own place. The Dutchman was mad, and Mary was alone.

Behind him he heard Madame Pineau scream, the third scream, and a babble of words.

The light in his cottage was on, and he breathed a sigh of intense relief.

He burst through the door to the kitchen. On the threshold, he stood stock-still and closed his eyes for a second. Beside the little gas stove, Berthe was watching over his supper. "Ted, what's happened? Why do you look at me like that?"

He felt paralysed.

He could say nothing; he just stared at her. She shrank back against the kitchen table.

"Ted, you don't mind my being here? It's just for a bit. Mary will be back soon . . . but Jan was beginning one of his

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bouts, and I'm a coward . . . and Mary said . . . she said she'd be back soon. She promised . . ."

Already he had stopped listening to her. He strode through to the front room, but there was something about it that stopped him at the door. It was seconds before he realised what it was.

One of the four paintings was gone.

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A DATE AT DUSK

'Twas twilight and I bade you go,
But still you held me fast;
It was the time of roses,
We plucked them as we passed!
THOMAS HOOD, *Ballad*

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
"Love has no ending.

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street.

I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry,
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

The years shall run like rabbits
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world . . ."
W. H. AUDEN, *As I Walked Out One Evening*

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A Song at Twilight

Also, she had a cat and she played the guitar. On days when the sun was strong, she would wash her hair, and together with the cat, a red tiger-striped tom, sit out on the fire-escape thumbing the guitar while her hair dried. Whenever I heard the music, I would go stand quietly by my window. She played very well, and sometimes sang too. Sang in the hoarse, breaking tones of a boy's adolescent voice. She knew all the show hits, Cole Porter, and Kurt Weill; especially she liked the songs from *Oklahoma!* which were new that summer and everywhere. But there were moments when she played songs that made you wonder where she learned them, where indeed she came from. Harsh-tender wandering tunes with words that smacked of piney-woods or prairie. One went: *Don't wanna sleep, Don't wanna die, Just wanna go a-travellin' through the pastures of the sky;* and this one seemed to gratify her the most for often she continued it long after her hair had dried, after the sun had gone, and there were lighted windows in the dusk.

TRUMAN CAPOTE, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

When summer is gorged with light,
and the large leaves drowsily hang
on the bent branch; when the cuckoo calls
and the thrush sings early and late:
then pale boy and painted girl
forsake the streets to wander by the river
or lie together in the meadow grasses
while the tall stalks bend and furl
over them, a valley of green shadows
capped by cotton clouds in a blue sky:
O now in love they think themselves in bliss
high as the hawk that hangs above the meadows
in marchpane sweetness invincibly secure
as vole or mouse among the roots of grass.

SEAN JENNETT, *Sonnet*

Lovely Transience

Her chignon lay softly on her neck, and dim curls clouded her forehead. Blue eyes, misty as Anthony's were bright, smiled faintly from the pool of glass; the curve of her mouth had a dream's outline, and over her indeterminate soft face shone the appeal of lovely transience. She was all woman, all fragility . . . beauty unfolded from her voluptuously in hours like this; evening and quietude adorned her like a crown.

KATE O'BRIEN, *Without My Cloak*

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She laid the brush down. It was too dark now. Demoyte began to get up. "Please wait a moment," said Rain, "just a moment more, please." He subsided.

Rain came forward and studied him, leaning thoughtfully across the table. The hands. Much depended on that. The hands must be another mark of strength in the picture, shown solid and square, somehow. But how exactly?

"I don't know what to do with your hands," said Rain. She reached across and took one of Demoyte's hands and laid it across the top of one of the books. No, that wouldn't do.

"I know what to do with your hands," said Demoyte. He captured the one that was still straying about on the table and lifted it to his lips.

Rain smiled faintly. She looked down at Demoyte, not studying him this time. Now it was quite dark in the room, although the garden was glowing still.

IRIS MURDOCH, *The Sandcastle*

At Evening to the Flute

When lads were home from labour
At Abdon under Clee,
A man would call his neighbour
And both would send for me.
And where the light in lances
Across the mead was laid,
There to the dances
I fetched my flute and played.

Ours were idle pleasures,
Yet oh, content we were,
The young to wind the measures,
The old to heed the air;
And I to lift with playing
From tree and tower and steep
The light delaying,
And flute the sun to sleep.

The youth towards his fancy
Would turn his brow of tan,
And Tom would pair with Nancy
And Dick step off with Fan;
The girl would lift her glances
To his, and both be mute:
Well went the dances
At evening to the flute . . .

A. E. HOUSMAN, *Fancy's Knell*

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CATTYWAMPUS

I stood up, looking towards the men.
" Don't anybody follow me. I'll be back."

BY BORDEN DEAL

I KNEW they would come to me long before they actually did and I didn't even have to decide what my answer would be. The first word I heard about the strange animal, I felt a tightening in my stomach, because I knew that sooner or later they would think about me, and remember. It wouldn't be long after that before they would decide that it was my responsibility.

You can count on about one strange-animal story every ten years or so. Somebody sees an animal, maybe in the headlights of his car or prowling around his barn in the beam of a flashlight, and he takes a shot at it. Because he's nervous and because he's not a very good shot anyway, he misses, and the animal disappears.

Then the stories start. It's not like any animal ever seen by man. It's a cattywampus, like the old folks used to tell about; it's been hibernating in a cave for thousands of years, an animal whose species has disappeared from the earth. It can get so bad that people are afraid to go out at night and the children begin to have nightmares. Gradually, the stories die out into legend and another strange animal has been added to the myths of the mountains.

Men have always told tales of strange beasts. It seems to fill a need inside them that's as old as the fear of the darkness pressing around the campfires of the human race. I'm sure that when we go out to the strange planets, there'll be new tales of fabulous animals to whet the adrenal glands with fear and wonder.

Our country lends itself to such tellings. After all, the mountains rise high and green around us, and no man can know all the cliffs and gorges where the mountain laurel grows, not even a man like me who was raised with a gun in his hand and who has killed just about every kind of game there is on this earth, even elephants in Africa and tigers in India. There are ridges and coves in our mountains where no man has set foot since Indian days. I've found some of those places myself, walking where no man has walked for so long that one might as well be back in primeval

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times, so that the hackles rise on your neck just from the pressing silence, the very absence of mankind.

They came to me, five of them, early one morning before breakfast. They stood in the yard looking up at me because I hadn't asked them in to have a chair and a cup of coffee like I should have. I didn't want to make them comfortable; I wanted them to go away as quickly as possible.

"It was seen again last night," Varner said. "It broke into Wallace's corn crib. He heard it ripping and tearing at the door and he stuck a gun out the window and shot at it. Theere it was, rearing up in the moonlight, taller than a manand twice as fearsome."

"A bear," I said.

Wallace shook his head solemnly. He was long and lean and solemn, anyway. "It wasn't any bear," he said. "I've never seen a bear looked like that in my life."

"There haven't been any bears in this valley for thirty years," Varner said.

"He came down out of the mountains," I said. "He's out of his territory. They'll do that sometimes."

"I know what a bear paw looks like, Sam," Wallace said. "I have seen a bear print. This didn't look like anything I've ever seen in my life."

"You know how these things get started," I said. "Maybe it was a man robbing your corn crib."

Wallace shook his head stubbornly. Then they fell silent, waiting for me to speak, to volunteer. I didn't say anything. I just stood there waiting for them to go away.

"You're probably right about one thing," Varner said. "Whatever it is, it came down out of those mountains. I got a theory about it. You remember that big forest fire that went on up there for two weeks or more about six months ago, early last fall? I figure it got run out by that big fire. Something that's lived and bred back there beyond the sight of man for no telling how many hundreds of years."

"Not very likely," I said. "It's folks' imaginations running away with them, and nothing more. You know how tales of strange beasts have always been told."

"You're darned right I know it," Varner said vigorously. "Where there's telling, there's bound to be a little truth. When things are being repeated over and over again, you know that somewhere back there, something real and true happened. There's always been strange beasts that lived not in the memory of man. And there are still, in spite of the country getting so civilised. Plenty of places where they can hide."

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" Every soul in the valley is afraid to put their heads out of doors after dark," another man said.

" Will you hunt it? " Joe Platt said. " You're the mightiest hunter ever in these parts. Will you kill it for us, Sam? "

I looked at him. He was the man, some years ago, who had come to me, when he'd heard that I was cleaning all the animal heads out of my house, and asked for them. I gave them to him because I didn't care to destroy them. I just didn't want to look at them any more. About a year later, he put up a motel on the highway for the tourist trade, along with a small zoo to attract the youngsters. He hung those heads of mine in the lobby as part of his attraction, and not long after, he'd started telling little stories about how he, himself, had killed this one and that one. He didn't ever tell them to anybody but the tourists, but I heard about it.

" No," I said. " I don't hunt any more."

" This is not hunting," Varner said. " This is something else again. If anybody could track that strange beast and kill it, you can. There's nobody else."

" No," I said. And then, because they didn't move, because they kept on waiting, I said, " I'm sorry, men. But my breakfast is on the table."

They went away then, reluctantly, moving slowly in a clump and looking back at me, one looking and then looking away quickly, then another one turning his head. I watched them down the road, then I went back inside the house and sat down at the table. Ruth filled my coffee cup again.

I looked up at her, knowing she would want to know. " They wanted me to go after their cattywampus," I said.

She sat down across from me at the table. " It's your duty," she said. " You ought to do it."

I looked at her. " You, too? "

" The women are afraid," she said quietly. " For the children. And not only that. They're afraid the men will try to hunt it down themselves."

" Let them," I said. " It's all imagination. I've heard tales of strange animals all my life. But the only animals I've ever seen are the ones that mankind has always known about. There are no strange animals."

She kept on watching me. " Why don't you like people? " she said at last.

I did not look up at her. I began eating to keep from having to talk. She got up from the table and moved restlessly towards the kitchen stove. The house was quiet around us.

" You won't ever have anything to do with people," she said.

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" You just want to stay up here in this cove by ourselves. You don't care if you never see a soul from week to week."

" I think people ought to mind their own business," I said. " Most of the trouble in this world comes from people minding other people's business."

She turned towards me. " But this *is your* business," she said.

I looked up at her. We had been married nearly ten years now. She went back to the hunting days, when I'd be gone a week at a time, when I'd even made a two-month trip into the Canadian Rockies, leaving her behind. We had never had any children. But we didn't need children to hold us together. We were steady and true in each other.

" It'll die down," I said. " They'll quit seeing it. They'll tell tales about it. But they'll quit being afraid. Because the strange animal doesn't exist, and you can't go on being afraid for very long of something that doesn't exist."

" Sam," she said in her quietest voice. " What is it with you? Why is it that you quit the hunting? "

I shook my head gently. I couldn't talk about it. I never would be able to talk about it. Because it wasn't anything sharp and definite that happened one particular day. I'd just killed so many deer and so many bear and so many mountain goats until all the killing was used up out of me. At first I began missing the shots because I was too slow getting the gun to my shoulder, too slow pulling the trigger, as though something were holding my hand back when I had the animal in my sights or centred in the cross hairs of the scope. Later, I hadn't been able to go out to hunt at all. I had just burnt out, that was all.

I was the greatest hunter ever known in our mountains. I was raised there, just as all our neighbours had been. But one day when I was just a boy, I'd been hunting with an old .22 that I'd swopped away from another boy. I was stalking a deer when he startled away out of sight and I looked up to see a man watching me.

He was Major Tom Walker. He was a rich man who had built a hunting lodge near us some years before, bringing his friends down out of the north to hunt for deer and bear and wild turkey and wild boars. He was a big man, with iron-grey hair and a straight back and a stern face.

" You couldn't have killed that deer," he said. " You could only have hurt him."

The tone of his voice made me ashamed. " I didn't think," I said.

He regarded me for a moment. Then he said, " Come on."

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He turned and walked away, with me following him. We went up the slope a mile or more to his hunting lodge. I looked round with wonder as he led me inside. I'd heard about it; but I'd never been here before.

He went to a rack of guns and stood before it, considering. Then he took one down, handled it, and said, "Here. This is yours."

That was the beginning. From then on, I was with Major Tom and his guests nearly every day at the lodge. I went on about every hunting trip that was made. I was half guide, half companion by the time I was sixteen years old, because not one of them, not even Major Tom, could match my shooting. I learnt to let the guests get the first shot, then to take the animal after they'd missed or wounded it.

But the best times of all were when Major Tom and I went off on our own. And there were those times when I was nineteen and when I was twenty that he took me to Africa and India for big-game hunting. On the second trip, I killed the third largest tiger that had ever been shot. It was when we were on our way to Africa on our third trip, when I was twenty-two, that Major Tom died, in his cabin aboard ship, of a heart attack.

I flew his body home, taking him back to the three married daughters, all that was left of his family, for he had never had a son. I was moved and astonished when I found that he had left me the hunting lodge and an annuity that would yield just enough money so I should not have to worry for the rest of my life.

I didn't go back home. I didn't even think about the hunting lodge. I joined the Army because the Korean War was starting about then. I wanted the infantry; I wanted to be a sniper. I should have been a killer-sniper because I was a crack shot and I had hunted animals all my life. The Army made me a company clerk and, during the sixteen months I spent in Korea, I fired a gun only at a target on the range. And finally, I came home.

I opened the hunting lodge on a commercial basis and met Ruth and married her; and after a few years I couldn't hunt or shoot any more, so we lived in the lodge and I wrote articles for the sporting magazines from time to time that gave me a sense of usefulness.

There was no definite reason why I had quit, nothing I could put my finger on and say, "This is it." I took the great heads out of our house to give to Joe Platt, and after a while he hung them in his motel and soon he began telling his little stories about how he'd hunted this one and that one.

I went on into my office and did some work so I wouldn't have to talk to Ruth. But the men were back the next morning,

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standing in front of the porch while I looked down on them.

"Two little girls were on their way to church last night, just about dusky-dark," Varner told me. "There was going to be a church pageant and they were in it. They were wearing white dresses and they had angel wings folded carefully over their arms. The strange animal rose up in the road before them. They screamed and ran. One of them is still screaming. Every time she wakes up from the stuff the doctor gave her, she starts screaming again."

"That's what telling old tales will do," I said. "You've frightened the children into seeing things."

"Then you're not going?"

"No," I said.

"All right," he said, turning away. "We will have to, then."

I looked at them standing there with their old shotguns. The best any of them would have would be an old buckshot shell that might fire and might not. The others would be loaded with bird shot. One of them even had an old hogleg .45. I wanted to laugh.

"You get to stamping around over the mountains and somebody'll get hurt," I said. "You'll be shooting at each other."

"We've got to try," Varner said. "That's all any man can do."

Ruth came out on the porch behind me. "He'll do it," she told the men. "He will go. Today."

I looked at her. There was an expression on her face that I had never seen before. I looked back at the men and nodded my head slowly.

"I'll be along in a little while," I said. "I've got to get ready first. Don't let anybody mess up the tracks. If there are any."

They went on away. Ruth stood waiting for me to look at her.

"Why do you want me to do it?" I asked her.

"Because I want you to recognise your duty when it comes along," she said. "You're part of the human race, Sam. The human race didn't die out when Major Tom died. There's still a lot of us around. This is something that nobody else can do, and when that kind of a job comes along, a man must recognise it."

"All right," I said. "I'm going. I'll prove there's nothing there. Will that satisfy you?"

"No," she said. "You must go for the right reason. Because the people need you to go."

"I can't go for that reason," I said.

She turned away from me, starting back into the house. "If you can't go for the right reason, there's no use in going."

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I saw the tears in her eyes as she turned away from me.

" I'll do it for you," I said. She came back to me then. I put my arms around her, holding her. " Is that enough? "

She looked up into my face. " I don't know. It's enough for me. I don't know whether or not it's enough for you."

" It's the best I can do," I said.

" Then go," she said, putting her arms around me, too. I couldn't understand why she had to cry about it.

I went inside the house and opened the locker where the one gun I had kept was stored. I had killed the great tiger with this one. I picked it up, feeling it heavy and familiar in my hand. I took the old shooting jacket and boots out of the locker and put them on. They were worn and familiar on my body. By the time I was dressed, Ruth had brought me a canteen of water and a supply of food. I kissed her and left the house, walking slowly down to the crossroads store.

The men were waiting for me in front of the store. We did not speak as they led me to the place where the children had taken fright. Traffic had moved over the road since, of course, so I went into the bushes on each side, searching.

I stopped, looking down. There was a track, all right. I squatted, and my spine tingled. I had never seen a track like this before. It tried to look familiar but it deformed itself out of recognition. I followed on to the next one. It didn't move like any animal I had ever seen, either, but with an irregular pattern that jarred at my sense of fitness.

I stood up, looking towards the men without really seeing them. " All right," I said. " Don't anybody follow me. I'll be back when I know something."

The tracks were a night old but they were easy to follow across the valley. The beast had moved along steadily, without any attempt at concealment. Near the edge of the valley, it had circled a barn and I saw where it had tried to break through a boarded-over window. I examined the marks made in the old wood but I could not recognise them. The puzzlement was eating deep into me, along with a stirring of ancient fear that the unknown always brings into a man.

I circled the barn and picked up the tracks again. A man and his six children were standing on the porch of the house by now, watching me.

" That cattywampus was here last night, all right," he called to me. " I heard him at the barn."

" What did you do? " I asked.

He grinned. " I got under the bed," he said. " I took the wife and young uns and crawled under and stayed till daylight."

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I went on. The track cut towards the mountains then, and in half an hour I was climbing. I began to sweat with the sun. Two hours later, I found where the cattywampus had bedded for the night.

I was steadied down into tracking by now. I searched the bed for body hair so I could tell what it was I was following. I could find nothing. I stood up, looking towards the mountains. I took a deep breath. I realised that I was afraid. Those tracks had put the fear into me. They kept trying to look like something that I could recognise, but they hovered always beyond the edge of recollection. There was a clublike, clawless look to them. Maybe, I thought, there is such a thing as a cattywampus. Maybe that forest fire did drive one down from the mountains.

I went on, following the fresher trail. It didn't seem to make much difference to the beast whether it moved by day or by night, and that wasn't characteristic either. He had slept for a while and then gone on, just as though he had a destination.

The day wore on. I climbed higher and higher into the mountains. I saw a deer and half lifted the rifle in a reflex of action. Then I stopped. I was not hunting. I did not intend ever to hunt again. This was only a public duty I was performing, against my will.

But I couldn't help slipping into the old patterns. It even seemed as though Major Tom was out here with me, moving along in his quiet way, without talking. I had not felt his good companionship for so many years. When he had died, he had left me empty of everything.

I stopped in my thinking. Then Ruth had been right. I had died when Major Tom had died and all the time since had been a mourning time. Just as mankind needs old tales and legends to fill a place inside its own imagination, I had needed a father and Major Tom had filled that place. I knew now why Ruth had been crying.

It was late in the afternoon when I caught the first glimpse of the quarry. I had just topped a ridge when I saw it moving up the opposite slope. I lifted the gun, even though it was too far for a shot. I wanted to get a look. I sighted through the scope sight, seeing the beast spring out of the magnification into my eyes.

I lowered the gun and stood there trembling. I had one quick look before he moved out of range. My mind did not believe what my eyes had seen.

It moved in a peculiar, rolling, hitching gait, on all fours. The fur was so thin it was indistinguishable. It was taller than a man if it could have stood erect. I had never seen anything like it.

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I was shaking. I wanted to turn and go back. I did not want to trail this strange thing to the end when I would have to face it.

After a few minutes, I steadied down. I had promised; and I was a hunter. I was a brave man; I knew I was brave. But the animals I had faced were known, while this beast was not.

I moved on slowly. I knew where he was headed now. There was a system of limestone caves about two miles ahead of us, a dozen or more of them boring out of the earth along the face of a clay bluff. He must den up there.

I cut away from the trail, moving fast, in a straight line for the cave. I broke into a half trot, my blood began to sing, and I was once again absorbed into the bone-remembered patterns of hunting.

I reached the caves in good time. I went up the bluff and lay down looking across to the slope. He was not yet in sight. The slope was bare and I would have a good look, a good shot.

I lay and waited, watching the slope beyond the small creek. It was less than an hour before he showed, moving down the slope in that peculiar, rolling motion pattern. I put the scope on him but he was still half hidden in the spring undergrowth.

At last he came out on the shale edge of the creek. He stopped to drink. I was watching him through the scope, puzzlement and fear fighting inside me so that I wanted to scuttle back from the edge of the bluff. Then I saw him flick a fish out of the water with an incredibly quick movement of his paw. He took the wriggling fish between both paws and stood up on his hind legs.

The familiar pattern of movements told me. I knew the full terrible thing that he was and I felt a breathtaking relief surging through me. He was a bear. He was familiar, even though there had not been a bear near the settlement for thirty years.

But what a bear! I thought of last fall's forest fire. He must have been caught in it, barely escaping with his life. His body hair was scanty, showing great patches of burnt and scarred flesh that would never again grow hair. His head was hideous with great welts and burns. I remembered peculiar tracks; he must have had to travel over burning ground so that his feet were crippled and deformed. I could feel myself flinching from the terrible pain this bear must have known. No wonder those who had caught a glimpse of him had been terrified.

He had come down out of the mountains because of hunger. So crippled and deformed, feeding had become almost impossible, even though a bear finds food plentiful most of the time, since they will eat anything. Here it was spring, when he should have been fattening and fattening himself, and he was so lean that one could see the rib cage.

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I lay there, watching him trying to eat the fish. There were no claws on his paws, so that the fish escaped him time and again. At last it got away, struggling back into the edge of the water, and was gone.

I had already decided not to kill the bear. There was no need. But I changed my mind. The greater compassion would be the quick death of a bullet, not the lingering death, the agony, that he must know now.

I had to do it. Not for myself. Not even for the people who were my neighbours. For the terrible animal himself. He started across the creek. I waited until he struggled to the other side with that horrible crippled gait. It made me sad to watch him move. I lifted the gun as he stood again and the first bullet smacked him on to his back. I fired again as he twisted over, thrashing—and then he was dead.

I stood up, breathing hard. I had pulled the trigger with unthought ease, not with the slow stuttering of the finger I had come to know when I was abandoning the hunting that had meant so much to me and to Major Tom. I knew why. There was again a compassion within me, the pity that is peculiarly human; the kind of humanity that I had grown away from.

A strange animal had died here. But not the crippled bear sprawled down there on the shale. The strange animal inside me that was not man, but only grief and anger and selfishness.

I went back and round the edge of the bluff, approaching the bear cautiously until I was sure he was dead. I examined him closely, feeling my stomach move with revulsion at the close sight of the great burnt scars on his body.

Then I knew the other thing I had to do. I took the thin nylon rope out of the knapsack. I hitched it to his hind leg and drew the heavy bear up the slope to the first cave. I tugged and hauled, sweating, until he was inside the cave. Then I moved stones, working in the coming dark, until the cave mouth was hidden.

No one would ever know. I would go back into the valley and I would tell them, in order to remove the fear, that I had killed the strange animal. But I would also tell them that his body had gone into the river and I had not been able to identify it. For I knew now. Man needs strange animals, myths and legends and old tales, in order to objectify fears outside himself where he can fight them with man's courage and man's hope. For man is the strangest animal of all.

I was finished. I picked up my rifle and moved through the darkness towards home. Where Ruth, my wife, and the people of the valley were waiting to hear the tale I would have to tell.

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WORST-NATUR'D MUSE

"The best good man, with the worst-natur'd muse . . ."
John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, 1647-1680

BY JOAN AIKEN

WHEN the desk arrived at his little house in Seymour Mews, Fred was on the point of going out. His swiftly-knotted tie was impeccable, his discreetly dark suit would have done credit to a diplomat; his face and hair were respectively impassive and smooth, except for the black lock which curved in a semi-colon over his brow and made susceptible young females occasionally mistake him for Mr. James Bond.

He paused on the step to check his latchkey, and it was at this moment that the van pulled up beside him. It was an elderly, battered vehicle which looked as if it might have come a long, long way; the words *A. Hole & Son, Haulage and Removals* appeared in trailing letters on the side of the cab, out of which a bent and wizened little man, frail as a dried leaf, deftly jumped.

This individual ran his thumb down a grubby consignment list, nodding familiarly to Frederick.

" That's the one, I thank you, sir," he said as if continuing some previous conversation. " Number thirteen here, antic desk. Just sign and I'll take her in for you."

" What the devil are you talking about? " inquired Fred, but quite politely. " You must have come to the wrong house; I haven't ordered any furniture."

" You're Mr. Rochester, ent you, sir? That's what it says here, J. W. Rochester, Helicon Cottage, Seymour Mews. Yes, sir, that's your desk all right and tight. We been a long time on the way but we got here in the end."

" There must be some mistake," Fred repeated calmly. " I suggest you ring your boss."

" I *am* the boss." The little man gave an eldritch chuckle.

" You're Mr. Hole? "

" Properly speaking," the little man confided, " Mr. Hole's me granfer. They calls me dad Half-Hole and me, I'm Quarter-Hole, but me granfer's retired, and me dad only takes on the

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special jobs. I'm the active partner, so to say. This consignment's all correct, you can take my word, sir."

"But where does it come from?"

"Ah, couldn't say for sure, sir. But it's your address on the form right enough, now, ennit?"

"Let's have a look at the desk before deciding anything," Rochester conceded, and Mr. Hole skipped round to the back of the van and pushed aside the dingy old curtain of sacking which protected the interior. Rochester noticed a large birdcage, a lionskin rug, a harp (sadly in want of repair), and something that might have been a stuffed crocodile. In front of these articles stood the desk, lashed precariously to the crocodile by a length of rope.

"Lovely bit o' work," said Mr. Hole, rubbing a caressing thumb down one of the bulbous dusty legs. "Jacobean this is, genuine. Three hundred year if it's a day."

"I can see that," Rochester agreed distastefully. "Not my favourite period for English furniture. However—I daresay the desk has its value. Thank you, you may take it in. Do you want any help?"

"No thanks, guvnor. She lifts out sweet as a pullet's egg." And sure enough, frail though he seemed, Mr. Hole whisked out the heavy desk almost before the words were completed. "Where d'you want her, sir? This yer study? Right then." He nimbled the desk through a doorway and planted it in the middle of the study carpet. "Fills up the room nicely, dunnit?" he said. "And now if you'll sign, sir—" He twitched a quill pen from behind his ear and, opening a hidden compartment in the desk, which he treated as familiarly as if he'd known it all his life, produced a silver inkstand and sandcastor. He dipped the pen and held it out to Rochester, who signed automatically. "I thank you, master—no, nothing to pay. And I'll bid you good day."

Mr. Hole took himself off with commendable speed; the van was out of sight before Rochester reached the front door a second time.

On the step he found his way barred once more by a plump man with a self-satisfied expression who raised a detaining hand and said, "Are you the householder, sir?"

"Yes, I am, and I've already been delayed once and I'm late for an appointment," Rochester snapped.

"Only to ask, sir—I need not inquire if you have a refrigerator, for it goes without saying in this residential area, but does it work satisfactorily, sir? Does it freeze? Are you sure, sir, that it entirely fulfils your requirements?"

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" Entirely," said Rochester, and the most efficient refrigerator could not have bettered the chill in his tone.

" May I ask, sir, do you use your refrigerator more for, say, iced lollies or iced lager? "

" If you must know," snarled Rochester, " I am a dipsomaniac safe-blower and I keep my admirable fridge stocked entirely with tequila and my own special brand of nitro-glycerine jelly. I am on my way to blow a safe now, and thanks to you I'm behind schedule and the jelly is beginning to melt."

" Quite a sense of humour I see, sir," the plump man said indulgently. " Well, if you are suited I won't intrude on you further at present, but always remember if you are ever dissatisfied you have only to call on ColdCo Refrigeration and we shall be glad to help you."

" Thank you," Rochester said, mechanically pocketing the card which the salesman handed him. As he drove away he noticed with faint disquiet that the man was still gazing after him.

Rochester had been truthful in asserting that he was a safe-blower, though the admission had been startled out of him by irritation and was not one he customarily made. In fact he passed for a man about town, an elegant skater on society's surface, and, in the intervals of crib-cracking, spent his time at coming-out dances, first nights, private views, and select dinner-parties, where, besides diverting himself, he often obtained information that materially helped his professional activities. His engagement book would have interested Scotland Yard immensely, for it was layered with such entries as:

June 9. 11 *p.m. Drinks at the Hot Spot with Sarah Somerset;*
11.45 *Chubb safe Egerton Crescent;*
12.0 *hot dogs on Embankment with Reeves.*

Rochester was now on his way to a house called Pelletts, some forty miles the other side of London. It belonged to Sir Gabriel Fidd and its name was a reminder that the vast Fidd fortune had come from the chicken-feed business. Rochester had reason to know that the Fidds were at Montfidget for the weekend and that Lady Fidd had left her fabulous necklace of condor's-blood rubies at home " because," she had confided at a dinner-party two nights ago, " sea air always makes them look utterly foul and cheesy."

The house was shut, bolted, and barred; the staff were out at a fish-and-twist party in the village three miles away. Frederick calmly parked in the stableyard and cut a neat hole in the back door with a thousand-rev-a-minute battery-operated drill.

He walked up the back stairs to the library, where the safe was concealed behind a dummy shelf of calf-bound classics.

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Unhurrying, working with the pleasurable absorption of the craftsman, he propped open the dummy shelf, built a neat little fosse of plastic putty in front of the safe, pulled a tube out of his pocket, and proceeded to squeeze from it into the crack round the door a quantity of slimy yellowish stuff.

"What's that jelly?" asked a voice over his shoulder.

With admirable presence of mind Rochester let his back and shoulders absorb the shock of this interruption; his rubber-gloved hands remained steady at their task, and he turned his head slowly to look at the yellow-haired girl who was standing behind him interestedly watching the operation.

"What are you doing here?" he said severely. "You should be at Montfidget."

"I got so bored with the stuffy old Duke and Duchess that I pretended to have a headache and went to bed and borrowed Tommy Montfidget's Jag and drove back to go to the fish-and-twist party; I'm in love with our butler," she candidly replied.

Deborah Fidd was the world's nitwit, but she was undeniably pretty with blonde Saxon hair and dark Slav eyes inherited from a Latvian grandmother.

Rochester considered her in perplexed annoyance; according to his usual routine he was now obliged either to shoot or seduce her, but he felt an odd reluctance for either course.

"You haven't answered my question," Deb persisted. "Who are you? And what is that stuff?"

"It's nitro-glycerine and I'm about to blow the safe," Rochester said irritably. "Come on, we'd better sit behind the sofa."

Deb giggled. "*That* old gag," she said. "You don't expect—"

Rochester picked her up and deposited her with a bump on the Aubusson behind a hideous satin-covered but heavy piece of furniture. A moment later there was another bump and a small cloud of dust.

"Oo! Look what a hole it's made."

"That was the intention."

"But who are you? I ought to know you but I'm so hopeless at faces. Ted Dexter's the only one I'm really sure of."

Rochester's hand, in the act of pulling out his Volksluger, hesitated and came out instead with a piece of pasteboard.

"I'm from the ColdCo Refrigeration Works," he said. "Your father has been having a spot of bother with his safe, but I've come to fix it for him."

"Do fridge people fix safes? How fascinating."

"Oh yes, it's always done. When you're grown up and have a

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safe of your own, if you are ever dissatisfied or want any advice you have only to call up ColdCo and we shall be glad to help you."

"Sweet of you but I'm grown up *now*. I'm seventeen." She slipped the card absently into the pocket of her maroon velvet pants. "I say, there are Mum's rubies. Aren't they foul? Just like underdone kidneys. I say, have you finished your job now? You wouldn't like to come to the party with me? Quite honestly you're even handsomer than our butler and it would be rather a thing to make him jealous."

"Sorry, my dear," Rochester said hastily. "That's out of the question."

"Why?"

"Because—because my old aunt's waiting up for me at home."

"I don't believe you've *got* an old aunt," she said crossly. "Anyway, call me up next week."

He looked again at the yellow hair and dark-fringed eyes. He melted. "All right," he said with a resigned shrug at his own folly. "And now you'd better run or you'll miss the best part of the party."

He slipped a sheet of paper into Sir Gabriel's secretary's typewriter, rapidly typed on it: *They look like underdone kidneys but just the same you should take better care of those rubies*, and laid it on the necklace.

"Aren't you going to clear up the mess?"

"My mate will do it tomorrow. The union's complaining about my overtime as it is."

He waved her a brisk good-bye and drove roaring back to London wondering what had come over him.

Three a.m. was an odd time to see a light in his front windows. Burglars?

He snugged the Volksluger into his right hand, opened the front door with his left. An elderly lady came out of the study to greet him. "Ah, my dear boy, *there* you are! What sadly late hours you keep! This must be remedied."

"And who might you be, madam?" Rochester asked courteously, after one lightning glance round to make sure she was not the extraordinary mouthpiece of cops, strong-arm boys, or foreign intelligence operatives.

Then he remembered his mendacious excuse to Deb. This old dame might have sat as a model for an aunt: she had grey hair, frizzed into a sort of Grecian knot at the back of her head; a round face; and screwed-up eyes peering at him intensely through a formidable pair of sculpted and brilliant-encrusted glasses; she carried a large knitting-bag; the total effect was a fairly potent mixture of good-humour and willpower.

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"My name," she said impressively, "is Laodameia," and waited for his reaction.

It was nil. "Look," he said, "I'm delighted to meet you but I'm tired just now; I've just been out on a job; and I'm sure *you're* wanting to get home; can I drop you anywhere?"

"This is my home," she said.

"Eh?"

"Do you not recognise me, my dear boy? I am your Muse. I came with the desk, from now for ever more to be your inspiration, your Egeria, your solace in time of woe, your spur, your stimulus—"

"There must be some mistake," Fred said distinctly. "I'm not a writer."

"You will be from now on, dear boy."

"But I don't use a Muse! I'm in no need of any spur, stimulus, solace, or what-have-you. Hell!" he cried passionately. "What sort of life is it if in his own home a man is pestered with unwanted desks, refrigerators, and now a Muse of all things?"

"What are you Making of your Life?" asked Laodameia, who tended to speak in capitals. She fixed him with a severe eye. "You have already frittered away your most Prolifick years. From now on, you must work! You must scorn delights and live laborious days. I shall be ever present to raise your Spirit."

She rummaged in a drawer of the desk, brought out a sheaf of foolscap paper, and handed him a pen, ready dipped in ink. "Poet, take your lute!" she cried dramatically.

But Fred had thought of a different kind of spirit. Tequila seemed the only antidote to this overbearing Mentor. "Your very good health, ma'am," he said, raising a ten-finger salute, and he downed the lot, his parting thought as he blacked out in rose-red mists being a faint query as to whether it was uncivil not to have offered some to the Muse.

When he woke he remembered the rubies. Where had he stowed them? Then he recalled that for some bird-witted reason he had left them behind. That brought Deb to mind—banana-haired, dark-eyed, she drifted across his hangover like a salamander through smog.

Last and least probable he remembered the Muse. She seemed now like a bad dream, perhaps a retroactive effect of the tequila. He raised himself with cautious optimism to drink some black coffee which his char brought him.

"There isn't a strange lady about the house, is there?"

The char gave him a startled glance. Gay Mr. Fred was, quite a Don Lothario, but never yet so foolish as to bring a young

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lady home—he always kept them at the end of their tether.

"I should hope not, sir! I've dusted the new desk, Mr. Fred, and will you be wanting the piano-tuner?"

The piano-tuner, Reeves, was Rochester's fence, who collected little caches of jewels from inside the Broadwood and disposed of them on the continent while ostensibly taking orders for cheap British pianos.

"No, not today, thanks. Lord, my head!" Rochester groaned, and rolled off to his bath. On his way back he looked into the study. There sat the Muse, immersed in *The Times*. "I always peruse all the papers and two new books every day," she said, looking at him magisterially over her glasses. "So should you. Come now, to work!"

"Mrs. Tosh!" bawled Fred. "Show this lady out! Madam," he said to her, "I am unable to comply with your requirements."

Mrs. Tosh stuck a puzzled face round the door. "Are you seeing things, Mr. Fred?" she said. "Your head *must* be bad. There ent no lady here. Try a raw egg in Worcs."

"Hence, with denial vain and coy excuse," commanded Laodameia. "I am only visible when I so Chuse—or anyway, to those of a Higher Perception. Poet, take your lute."

"How many times do I have to tell you that I don't *play* the lute?" poor Fred snarled, but it was no use; in double-quick time she had him sitting at the desk before a thick stack of foolscap, on the topmost page of which she had inscribed in an elaborate seventeenth-century hand:

PHILEMON: A LAMENT IN LXVIII CANTOS

On the Follies and Excefses of the Prefent Age

"Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string," she ordered. And despite Fred's protests that he didn't in the least want to lament loudly for Philemon, she started dictating at a great rate. He had no course but to take down her words. Soon his hand was aching with the effort to keep pace; hitherto he had hardly written anything longer than a note of acceptance or an occasional limerick for a monthly called *Stage and Stable*, but the Muse had no mercy on him; they worked steadily through the day and, by the time Frederick was allowed to stagger off to bed, more than one hundred and forty-eight pages of foolscap had been covered with iambic pentameters.

Next day was a repetition of this routine, until eight in the evening, when a duchess called Winnie rang up and invited Fred to an impromptu champagne supper.

"I'm afraid I have to go out now," he told Laodameia.

"Impossible! There are yet twenty-nine cantos to be inscribed."

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"I'm afraid social duty calls."

"You fpeak of focial Duty when the Muse dictates?" said she with curling lip. "And what am I to do, pray?"

"Go to bed, sweet Muse," suggested Fred cheerfully, and escaped.

Unfortunately, whom should he encounter at the party but Deb Fidd, looking silly yet ravishing in zebra-striped silk. "Oo, it's my lovely ColdCo man!" she cried, and made a beeline for him. "Do you know, Daddy *hadn't* been expecting you at all that night, and he was quite cross! He's on the board of ColdCo, and he said that nothing of the kind had been arranged! So have they sacked you?"

Evidently Deb's memory for faces was better than she had imagined.

"You must have met my twin brother," Rochester said hastily. "We never speak of him—he's the black sheep of the family. Look, shall we run away from here and go somewhere amusing?"

Deb was delighted, and he took her to a nightclub called the Custard Apple and made himself so agreeable that he had soon ousted the butler from her fickle heart. He dropped her at her aunt's in Lowndes Square and went on to a little job at a house in Gerrard's Cross which yielded a diamond sunburst, some fair-to-middling pearls, and a box of negotiable securities. Then home to Helicon Cottage where the Muse, who never seemed to tire, was furiously reading *Ulysses*. "Hokey pokey, penny a lump," she muttered. "What means this Sorry Drivel?"

"I see my Muse labours," Fred remarked, patting her kindly on the shoulder, and he went quickly to bed before she could think of any rejoinder. But she made him suffer for this cavalier treatment next day, by indulging in an ostentatious migraine. She dictated three cantos with a damp purple towel wreathed round her head, punctuating the lines by heavy sighs.

"The sound is forc'd, the notes are few," she lamented, breaking off. Fred offered aspirin, but she haughtily refused, preferring to gloom about the house in Dolefull Dreariment. Later, however, he found she had been helping herself lavishly to bread and peanut butter (evidently this delicacy was new to her) and he felt less guilty at having caused her headache. Nevertheless his conscience made him stay in that evening instead of going to a premiere, and she brightened up enough to dictate three more cantos.

After a few days Fred became more or less resigned to having the Muse about. She never slept but, given plenty of reading matter and a sufficient supply of peanut butter to keep her happy,

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she would sometimes consent to his having an hour or two off. "Just to acquire material," Fred pleaded.

The Muse was heard to mutter something about ignoble haunts, but she let him go; unfortunately she developed a tendency, if he was late back, to come and fetch him from whatever party he happened to be gracing. His friends were at first startled and then derisive at the sight of a large cross lady in a purple scarf who hovered like a thundercloud on the corners of festive gatherings until she could pounce on Fred and drag him away.

"Of course, it's heaven to meet your aunt," a young countess said tactfully to Fred at a hilarious session of the Gulliver Club, "but don't you think this is rather the wrong age group for her?"

"You're making me conspicuous," Fred said peevishly to Laodameia—he did not mention his particular reason for finding this undesirable. "Can't you stay home and do the pools or something?"

"Pool, sir? Pool—aye, kennel, puddle, sink?"

"No, dear, football pools." He showed her the technique, and she displayed a surprising aptitude, winning a hundred and twenty pounds the first week. Delighted, Fred took out a subscription to the *Competitors' Monthly*, and light-heartedly went off to the theatre, leaving Laodameia at work on a couplet in praise of peanut butter which, if it won, would entitle her to free supplies of this commodity for life.

When he came home she had achieved:

My song were faint without it; how to utter
Sufficient praise of Watkyns' Peanut Butter?

Fred was dubious about this, feeling the makers would prefer something with more snap and sparkle, but, not wishing to discourage the old lady, posted it off.

Relations did not continue long in this amicable train. The couple were at work on Canto XLV that evening when the doorbell rang. Laodameia sniffed, suspicious as a bloodhound, when Fred went to the door.

Deb blew in like a drift of cherry-blossom.

"Surprise, surprise!" she carolled, giving Fred a spiky potted cactus with a pink flower and standing on tiptoe to kiss his chin. "Come on, let's go out and have fun!"

Casting a guilty glance towards the study, where Laodameia, at sight of the visitor, had begun swelling with doom-laden reproach, Rochester grabbed his car key and left.

When he arrived home at four a.m., having gleaned a very good tiara in Cadogan Square on the way, he was subjected to a torrent of reproach and accusations of frivolous living. The Muse quoted

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some vindictive remarks about painted faces in Hyde Park by Thomas Randolph and ended significantly, "My Muse were she my Love should be!"

"Let's discuss it tomorrow, shall we?" begged Fred sleepily as he shut the tiara into the piano.

"I will call you betimes," she said with ominous brow.

"I'm taking Deb to Wimbledon; I shan't be free till five." He yawned, and was instantly asleep.

The Muse retired to brood darkly over half a dozen copies of the glossies and the collected plays of G. B. Shaw. She rummaged the fridge for peanut butter and, finding the supply exhausted, fell back on playing the piano. Her choice of music was funereal, but luckily it was audible only to Fred.

At seven he staggered up, despairing of sleep. "For heaven's sake, put away that tiara!" he snapped. She had perched it rakishly on her purple turban.

"I misdoubt it was not Come by Honestly," she reproved him.

"I'll thank you to remember that my morals at least are my own affair."

With an ill grace he took down half a dozen stanzas. Then he bathed, shaved, and left the thankless Muse for the infinitely more attractive company of Deb. Laodameia watched his departure with a kindling eye and then sat down to read the morning paper which carried a headline story about the theft of the Duchess' jewels, with a picture of the tiara inset.

By the end of the morning, despite interruptions from the char and the piano-tuner, she had absorbed enough information to ring Scotland Yard. Her statement corroborated evidence already collected by a plain-clothes man masquerading as a refrigerator salesman, and was received with gratifying interest.

When Rochester came home that evening the Muse was all smiles, even when he warned her that he would shortly be going out again.

"A cheerful life is what the Mufes love," she remarked surprisingly. "Come, let us fit upon the rocks and fee the fhepherds feed their flocks."

"Perhaps tomorrow?" Frederick said cautiously.

"I spake in metaphor. I will Accompanie you to the busy haunts of men."

"I'm only going out on a job," he said, taking some tubes of his patent mixture from the fridge.

"The man who weds the facred Mufe, Disdains all mercenary views," she observed.

"I could make several replies to that but I'll content myself

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with pointing out that unless and until you win a lifetime supply of peanut butter we need cash to eat. I'm going to crack a safe in Aylesbury."

"I know," replied the Muse, who had been studying his engagement book.

The car trip to Aylesbury upset her vibrations and she disappeared, but materialised beside him again as soon as he began operations on the safe, which belonged to the Marchioness of Tring. Laodameia watched for a few minutes as he dibbled in his explosive; then, to his dismay, she suddenly began declaiming verse at the top of her voice.

The Muse has broke the twilight's gloom
To cheer the shiv'ring native's dull abode . . .
Her track, where'er the Goddess roves
Glory pursue and generous Shame
Th'unconquerable Mind, and Freedom's holy flame!

"Will you be quiet!" exclaimed the scandalised Fred. "I'd never have let you come with me if I'd known you'd kick up such a row."

Her words had been a signal, however, and half a dozen police burst into the room. Fred could see the game was up; he made no attempt to resist arrest, but did have the presence of mind to drop his Volksluger into the Muse's knitting-bag. She stood loftily apart and took no further hand in the proceedings. Indeed the CID men, who must have been lacking in Higher Perception, remained unaware of her presence and were rather puzzled as to who had given the signal. This fact remained a mystery throughout Rochester's trial, which was a society sensation. Deb Fidd weepingly testified to the beauty of Fred's character and added that she was engaged to him—which her father contradicted—but her unsupported testimony was not enough to counteract the effect of the flagrante delicto capture and the nitro-glycerine found in the fridge. Fred received a stiff sentence; his one consolation being that Laodameia, after her betrayal, had at least seen fit to disappear and leave him in decent solitude.

Deb managed to see him before he was taken away.

"I'll wait for you!" she cried tearfully. "And I'll send you a file in a pie."

He hugged her and whispered, "Not a file, ninny—some skeleton keys."

But several months elapsed before he heard from her, and meanwhile, to his horror, the Muse suddenly reappeared and took up most unwelcome residence in his cell. Vainly he pleaded the impropriety of this course.

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" What Bard could wish a more secluded spot; nor mossie Dell, nor Grove, nor Fernie Grot? " she observed, and began to dictate Canto XLVI.

" O Muse, spectre insatiable! " exclaimed Rochester, who could quote, too, on occasion. " Ne m'en demande pas si long! " and he added, " I'm surprised you have the effrontery to show your face here."

" But, dear boy, it was for the Advancement of Literature that I brought you to this Place."

Fred was digesting this when the warder poked his head in. " Letter for you, mate, and a tube of hand-cream from your girl-friend."

Deb's letter was very short. " Darling Fred, this is to say Good-bye. I fear you will say I have a very ficcle nature but am going to marry Tommy Montfidget so have to break off our engagement. Will send skel. key when back from honeymoon. Tons of love, Deb."

Laodameia scanned the envelope with a puzzled frown. " Young man—" she said. But it took her some time to attract Fred's attention. Lovely Deb, darling Deb—like thistledown she had drifted into his life and out of it again. Kissing her hand in an airy good-bye she drifted away . . .

" I—I beg your pardon, did you speak? " he said to the Muse.

" Why is that envelope addressed to Frederick Rochester? "

" That's my name."

" Not John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester? "

" Heavens, no."

" 1963? " she said, staring at the postmark. " Not 1663? "

" Dear me, no."

" Alack! " she cried. " Too late! Oh woe is me, I am undone. I must be gone."

Gathering up her knitting she gave him an absent farewell pat on the head and disappeared without more ado. Mechanically Rochester put the tube of nitro-glycerine in his sponge-bag and sat down to savour his new-found freedom. No Muse is good news, or so many a harassed poet has claimed, but now the old baggage was gone he quite found he missed her, and would have been glad to see her back.

" Your birthday today, mate? " asked the warder, poking in another letter.

> Dear Sir, We are pleased to inform you that your entry, received together with twenty labels from Watkyns' Peanut Butter jars, has been adjudged winner of our competition by our Panel of Expert Judges. This is to instruct you that we are prepared to send you a weekly

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supply, free, for the rest of your natural life, of Watkyns' Superfine Peanut Butter, or, should you prefer it, a lump sum in lieu . . . Our lawyers will be calling on you . . .

By rights it belongs to Laodameia, he thought. How she would enjoy it. Perhaps if I work hard at my writing she might come back again.

Doggedly he sat down, licked the stub of pencil the prison allowed him, wrapped a wet sock round his brow, and started work on Canto XLVII:

Alas, what boots the ravell'd Sock of Life?
The Poet woos the Muse before the Wife . . .

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POTBOILING!

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once hit off the portrait of Amalfi in lines which are now carved in marble in the foyer of the principal hotel. He wrote: " Where the waves and mountains meet/Where, amid her mulberry trees/Sits Amalfi in the heat." These verses may not be good but the general information they contain is accurate. Longfellow, while he laboured over these lines, could look out of his hotel window and check them.

Between the mountains and the sea he would also have observed a small level space. In his time this was vacant. But since, as he says, it is hot there, it was used for an open-air cinema.

Then one year, an enterprising young man installed brand-new apparatus, among it a fashionable battery of very loud loudspeakers.

One tranquil July evening I was sitting on my terrace drinking an aperitif, when suddenly a most frightening clamour burst out from below me. Stentorian voices roared like giants in a quarrel and music brayed from what seemed to be massed brass bands . . . . Longfellow's window was almost blown out of its frame.

I found the young man and gave him a piece of my mind . . . he flourished his police licence under my nose.

Officially, nothing could be done. The management asked me as a writer to lend them my moral support. Nobody had ever asked me to lend them my moral support before, and I was most interested. They pointed to the marble tablet. Could Longfellow have composed his verses in the middle of that racket which was going on below? Privately, I thought he could have composed them in a boiler factory; publicly, as a representative of my profession, I said that he could not.

AUBREY MENEN, *Speaking the Language Like a Native*

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The Golden Orchid

NIGHT, during the winter months when the temperature in Bangkok drops from the middle eighties to the low seventies, comes silently, swiftly, almost secretly to the city the Siamese call, The Abode of Angels.

Night, too, has in this laughing eastern city a regalia of her own. The moonflowers, white and smelling of nectar, open as the light vanishes, The tricycle rickshaws are suddenly seen to carry two flickering flames as they dodge the motor traffic. In the Chinese market a thousand naphtha flares illuminate the stalls. And the whole galaxy of stars seems so close in the blackness of the sky that it is natural for the children to believe that they are the candles of Buddha.

The night clubs, too, stir themselves with the welcome approach of darkness. Regularly, at six o'clock, a rickshaw would drive up to the Golden Palm carrying a fat Chinese who seemed even larger than he was because all around and over him were draped parcels: parcels of pork, meat, snipe, fish, vegetables, melons, groceries. Ah Fung would unload himself with difficulty and, with an imperious gesture, bid the driver carry his parcels into the dark interior of the Golden Palm. Seconds later a light would be switched on, and

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by Gerald Sparrow

then one could see that this famous Night Club—it was known the world over from Los Angeles to Cairo—had no walls, though it had a roof. The decor was white and gold and in the centre, halfway between the bar where the girls sat, and the band, there stood a great, flamboyant, arrogant golden palm.

At this moment there was usually the characteristic sound of a Chinese altercation, as if some remote mandarin was ordering an execution. It was Ah Fung paying off the rickshaw driver.

As Ah Fung busied himself with the preparation of his kitchen, he cursed softly. His coolie, Ah Lung, was late again. With the girls, no doubt, unable to tear himself away. They say that no woman can resist a Chinese man who is out to captivate and capture her. Ah Lung was a very Chinese young man. He had skin as smooth as a peach, fine features, and the most engaging smile. No wonder one maiden after another fell to his charms. Just as Ah Fung was about to explode in wrath, Ah Lung glided in without a word and started work without, as it were, changing step. The Golden Palm kitchen was under way.

Half an hour went by before the next arrivals. They were the six Chinese boys, two of whom served at the bar and four waited

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on the guests. These four, under the command of Ah Loke, a senatorial figure referred to as the butler, were numbered one, three, five, and seven. I never discovered why this was, but perhaps guests who might have to wait a little for their new round of drinks were reassured by the impression that they had seven men waiting on them whereas, in fact, there were only four.

Ah Loke, at this point, would stand by the golden palm and, without actually doing any work himself, he would direct operations. The bar boys set to work polishing their glasses. The three serving boys unstacked the tables and chairs and covered the tables with new cloths; twenty-two tables in all. Then they placed on each table a candle, white or gold, and around this, cunningly, they made little patterns, usually in the shape of a heart, either of kut chine, which we call bougainvillaea, or soi fa, the little pink blossom that grows like a weed in Bangkok gardens.

Nai Samien, the Siamese clerk, who kept the accounts, came at ten to eight. He was a thin, silent, smiling man and, whoever lost money at the Golden Palm, it was not Nai Samien.

The first car to arrive was that of Mr. Borge, the Dutch Manager.

Mr. Borge ate his dinner alone, sipping a glass of Dutch lager with the grilled snipe that Ah Fung had cooked with such care.

Finally Mr. Borge ordered his black coffee and formulated in his mind the stern first sentence of rebuke to the incorrigible Argot, the band leader, and his dilatory team. But he had hardly sipped his coffee when they all swarmed in, led by the smiling Armenian who said, " Good evening, Mr. Borge," ingratiatingly. The fat drummer, Nuridin, an Indonesian; Elspeth his gay little Burmese wife, the chanteuse; Pat Mace, the trumpeter, and little Pietro Fultini and his brother who provided the string music.

Argot wasted no time. He slipped on to his stool and softly, coaxingly, he played a German waltz that he knew was a favourite of Mr. Borge. It was not a great melody but it was gentle and evocative.

Monsieur Argot loved this short interlude at the Golden Palm. He could play at this time the kind of music he liked which was the light classical music of Central Europe with a sprinkling of gipsy tunes thrown in. And it was this music that, nightly, seduced the sentimental Mr. Borge, so that he dismissed all thoughts of rebuking the band.

Towards the end of Argot's indulgence the girls began to stream in. There were thirty-two of them. And they were of a number of nationalities: Siamese, Chinese, Burmese, Eurasian, Japanese, and Malayan. In Siam girls who earn their living by love outside marriage are known as golden flowers or golden orchids.

The girls of the Golden Palm had a purely contractual relationship with the establishment. In order to earn percentage tickets during the evening they had to sign a book before ten o'clock—that was the hour when the first guests were likely to arrive.

On this particular evening—it was the last Sunday in January, '41

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—having nothing to do after dining alone at my house, I dropped into the Golden Palm just before ten. I nodded to Borge, who came over to find me a table and stayed to chat about the racing we had had at the Turf Club that afternoon. While we talked one tricycle rickshaw after another drew up outside, their little lamps gleaming in the drive as they decanted their passengers, usually two girls together, laughing and talking to each other, like animated butterflies attracted by the lights of the Golden Palm.

It was nearly ten now and Mr. Borge beckoned to the butler to bring him " The Girls' Book." Ah Loke did so, glancing at the Roulette cuckoo clock. There was still a minute to go, he said. Mr. Borge nodded, but started to tick off in pencil each signature on the list, occasionally glancing at the girls who had gathered near the bar and were arranging themselves at their tables, to make sure, I suppose, that each signature had really been made by the girl herself.

As he was engaged in this task a girl ran up the steps and, smiling, came over to sign the book.

" Sorry, Nai," she said to Borge, " I only just made it."

Mr. Borge nodded, allowed her to sign her name. I watched her sign " Nicole." She smiled again, then ran over the dance floor to join her friends.

I asked Borge who she was.

" Nicole? Oh, she has just come to us. Not more than seventeen, I think. Intelligent. Speaks French and English. She is a Siamese-French Eurasian."

A young vice-consul from the Embassy arrived and joined me. We talked over the events of the day and drank Tuborg lager. On the spur of the moment I said, " Let's ask one of these girls to come over." I gave the order to Ah Loke, the butler, "Ask Nicole if she would join us."

He nodded, smiling. " Yes, sir."

Nicole looked up as Ah Loke spoke to her. Her eyes settled for a moment on our table. Then she nodded, and walked over. She held out her hand and said, " Good evening. I've won money at the races. You must have a drink with me."

This was not at all what we expected, but it seemed churlish to refuse. As she ordered the drinks I had time to look at Nicole more closely. She was very small, certainly not more than five feet in height, but beautifully proportioned. A very slim waist was accentuated by full and lovely breasts in which, as I was later to discover, she took the greatest pride. Her eyes and hair were as darkly brown as unprepared opium, and only her lips gave an impression of passion, for her lower lip was much larger than the upper lip and this gave her face irregularity. She was intensely vital, and she had an acute, sometimes malicious, sense of humour. She asked us what language we would like to talk in, " I know only Siamese, French, English, and a little Chinese . . ." We said we were English.

She smiled. " How nice. English, the language of honour.

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Dear Sir, I confirm your letter of the sixteenth as to the Mombasa shipment . . . French, the language of love. Siamese, the language of flattery, and Chinese, the language of sophistication. I like English best, both English English and American slang. I don't say that to please you. It just happens that one can have too much love and flattery and sophistication."

" Do you have too much love, Nicole? "

For a moment she did not reply. She was, I think, offended. But in a moment she smiled. " Not of the right kind, Nai."

I noticed she used the word Nai—meaning master or sir—just as a Siamese girl would use it. The more one spoke to her the more one realised that at heart she was a Siamese. She wore, usually, an adaptation of Siamese dress, and tonight she was wearing a little white lace blouse and a Siamese prasin, a skirt in purple and gold. Refusing wine, she joined us in drinking lager.

It was now that the bubble burst at the Golden Palm. Ten minutes ago the place had been quiet, decorous, orderly. Now the patrons surged in, so that Ah Loke and his men had to hurry to erect new tables on the ever-contracting dance floor. British and Chinese, Siamese and Danes, French and Malays, Germans and Indians, all were here and drinking and talking in a crescendo of sound that made a barrage through which the music of Monsieur Argot and his band struggled to assert itself.

Argot played the song that had just come out from home, " Smoke gets in your eyes." I danced with Nicole and, as we did so, the vice-consul, waving to us, left. I asked Nicole if she would come home with me. She said, " Yes, if I can stay with you a month and only come here at weekends. I need a change." This was not what I had planned, but this was the way it was. . .

An hour later Nicole was in my large bed under the great white head fan. I turned out the light, but the room was not dark for the moon was waxing and in its third quarter. She came into the bed and knelt, bringing her hands together palm to palm, fingers outstretched. I could see her profile clearly, a little dark angel praying to Buddha. I could just hear the faint murmur of her prayer in Siamese. It took her perhaps two minutes. Then it was over. She had let down her long hair and this now she threw over her shoulder so that it should not obstruct her . . .

She laughed as she did so and said, " And now, Nai, we can enjoy ourselves . . ."

After she had gone to sleep, I lay for an hour or more awake. It must have been early morning for I heard the faint unmistakable whisper of the dawn wind that was going to call the sun. Then I slept beside her thinking that, perhaps, I should never quite forget the moment when I first saw Nicole by moonlight saying her prayers.

The situation was not without its difficulties. I had no wish to intrude on the prejudices of my friends, some of whom would disapprove of Nicole. I knew that because she was so young and so lovely—and spoke English so aggravatingly well—she would

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annoy the European women and even arouse jealousy. Sitting under my travellers tree in my garden on the morning after Nicole came to me, eating my breakfast which Kian, my servant, brought me from my green-and-white teak house, I turned these matters over in my mind.

Nicole was still in bed. I had left her sleeping like a child, the morning sun lighting her face which had an expression of complete serenity, while she breathed evenly and slowly, not waking from what seemed a blissful sleep. But she must have woken soon afterwards for I heard the shower being turned on in my bathroom and a few minutes later, her long hair streaming down her back, dressed in pyjamas and a blue silk dressing-gown, she joined me.

She teased me about my breakfast, " Oh, these English breakfasts! Darling, how can you? "

" Have some yourself? "

She looked over the green lawn of the garden towards the bougainvillaea that grew in great clusters round my house and said, " For me, coffee. It's all I ever take." She poured herself out a cup, then brought her little silver cigar case from the pocket of her dressing-gown and lit a minute cigar. " This is my breakfast. It's very good for my figure. You look worried, darling. What about? No, don't tell me, I'll tell you . . ."

As she spoke she fastened round her neck the small jade image of the Buddha on a gold chain that I had seen her place carefully on a bedside table.

" You did not really want me to come for a month, did you? Just a night—and then finish. Well, I will do that if you want. You can call me a rickshaw. But I'd like to stay if you would like me to. I won't come with you to the Sports Club except for the racing when everyone goes, and, of course, I won't come in your car when you go to work. If any of your friends come here with their wives I will vanish . . . There is no reason why you or they should be embarrassed. I'd like to go to the cinema with you. They can only say that you were seen with a rather pretty Siamese girl. I can dress the part. You'll see. Shall I stay, darling? "

" Of course. And thank you. You have solved the problems."

Nicole laughed. " They were not too difficult to guess or to solve. So I can be your ' mea noi ' for a month and, darling, you will see how I can do it. I will order the meals, order the drinks, and get these lazy servants of yours working while still making them my friends. Oh yes, I can do it. You'll see."

I did not doubt it, yet I had some misgivings about the whole arrangement. It was a little unusual, even in Bangkok . . . But Nicole would make me forget. She would be the perfect opiate. I would worry no more. If it was the life of an animal, it was the life of a happy animal. Or, at least, of a man who was able to forget. There is a great deal to be said for living the life of an intelligent animal, at least when the circumstances of life suggest that danger and death are soon to be constant companions . . . We had the opportunity of sinning and the inclination to do so.

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I do not suppose I shall ever again be as happy in the physical sense as I was during the five weeks that Nicole stayed with me. She had promised to stay a month, but she extended it.

I think Nicole's love-making was based on the very simple idea of man-worship or husband-worship. For the time, I was her husband, and it was her pleasure to love me in the ways which she thought would intrigue and satisfy me. She was practical on these points. Very early in our friendship she asked, "Do you like to love or be loved, Gerald?"

I said I liked to love, but I don't think this was true. Nor did I deceive Nicole. It was she, always, who took the initiative. This was an old tradition in Siam where the Kings for centuries had had young maidens who crept in to the foot of the Royal Bed and gently reached out and upwards to where the Lord of Life lay.

So it was with Nicole. But, on occasions, she would tire of this gentle insinuation and laugh about love.

We dined at least once a week at the Golden Palm, usually on Saturday when the place was crowded. On these occasions Nicole's manner was very nicely balanced to show her friends among the girls that she was not chong hong—proud—but at the same time to convey that she was the mea noi—the little wife—of Nai. Nicole liked to get drunk rarely but deliberately. "Shall we get drunk tonight, darling?" she would ask, and if I said yes, she would drink gin pahits until she was gently intoxicated.

Her virtues included tambol—making merit—which she did by offering candles and flowers to the spirits on the platform of the spirit house in my garden. Sometimes she would give cakes and brandy as well, and these gifts seemed to bring her quiet pleasure.

I was in danger of falling in love with Nicole. Before I did so I felt the danger as if it was something real, alive, and urgent. I thought, If I fall in love and marry this girl, I may bitterly regret it.

Using those strange powers of extra-sensory perception that women have, Nicole sensed that I had made some resolution concerning her.

It was towards the end of the fifth week that she said to me—we were dining at home—"Nai, now is the time to part. You think you will be unhappy, but in fact you will be relieved."

I protested, but perhaps without conviction. She took the present I gave her very gracefully.

The next morning after breakfast she called a rickshaw and Kian placed in it her single brown suitcase of buffalo hide. Then Nicole kissed me and weid—bowing and bringing both hands palm to palm to her forehead—as the Siamese do when saying good-bye. As she turned her face away she was crying, but restrainedly, and this I found unendurably moving. She managed to smile, and then she ran to the waiting rickshaw. She gave an order to the man and he started to lope off down the drive at that curious rapid shuffle, half walking, half running, that rickshaw coolies use.

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Nicole turned round once just before she vanished from sight and I saw she was waving a minute white lace handkerchief. I waved back and then, alone, felt the utter emptiness of my house without her. I was for a day or two desperately unhappy. Then the rhythm of life started to reassert itself.

Having lived in Bangkok for so long, I may be forgiven for thinking it the most entrancing of Far Eastern cities, and the Siamese the most attractive of Oriental people.

The treasure of the Grand Palace in Bangkok is in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the most sacred image in Siam. I often wandered through the courtyards of the Palace which had a feeling of absolute serenity far removed from the garish, tempestuous life of the city. It was delightful there in the early morning when the rising sun would first illuminate the pagodas bringing their colours of blue and green and gold to life. The monks would be returning at this time from receiving the gifts of daily food from the faithful. Each came back alone, hugging his yellow robe, carrying the shining wooden bowl that contained the rice, the fish, the chillies, and perhaps the fruits, melons, or lychees, or papaya, that he would eat that evening. I loved the courtyards of the Grand Palace. I always went there alone, for it was a place for silent communion and escape from the false values of the world outside.

When Nicole left me and I had very light work to do I walked in the Palace every day. The guards knew me and never challenged me. These were the last interludes of peace that I experienced before the storm broke.

As well as my British and European friends, I had a fairly large number of Siamese friends and acquaintances. Many of these I had met racing for I had two horses, one Sai Sunee—beautiful lightning—the other Boon Kird—happily born. The first was an Australian griffen, the second a Thai-bred pony no more than twelve hands, but each in its class won races, and this brought me into touch with other owners most of whom were Siamese. They were an extrovert, happy-go-lucky lot, and great sportsmen. It was racing that brought Nicole back into my life.

It was November '41. The temperature had dropped from the middle eighties to the middle seventies, unusually cool for the early "winter." This was the time when, in my garden, I could grow roses, and zinnias, and large red-and-yellow tomatoes. The orchids, of course, I grew all the year round in the open. They were the hardiest of plants and asked only for a bucket of water to be slapped over them in the evening.

It was Saturday afternoon and the pleasantest time of the week in Bangkok. We raced on Saturday at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club and on Sunday—after church—at the Royal Turf Club.

I had my luncheon on the verandah of the Sports Club, a cold pheasant and a large silver mug of beer. As I ate I scanned the programme of eight races. My entry was there: No. 7 Boon Kird (12-2) Black, Cambridge blue sleeves and cap.

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The racing life was made very easy for one in Siam. I had my comfortable wicker chair, my excellent lunch served by an attentive Chinese boy, and the services of an agile little golf caddy in a red numbered coat who placed my bets for me either with Mr. Pestongu, the urbane Parsee bookmaker, or on the totalisator.

It wasn't until just before the last race that I saw them. Nicole was standing in the little alcove in front of the bar. She was looking up and smiling at a tall young man. I knew by some blind apprehension that she was deeply in love with him. I cannot say why I immediately knew that this was so, but every movement she made seemed to accentuate her complete absorption.

Nicole saw me and waved. I had a moment of unreasoning jealousy and despair, then I joined them.

"Gerald, this is John D., a good friend of mine."

The young man who smiled at this introduction was the most un-American American, in outward appearance, that I had up to then encountered. I think it was his manners that I noticed first; they were courtly and considerate. He must have been two or three inches over six feet and he was well made, with the shoulders of a boxer or an oarsman. He had chestnut hair and very dark grey eyes, a scar on his left cheek and a feature that I never recall in a man before, a most beautiful mouth, that must have disturbed every kind of woman. When Nicole looked away from John D., —as everyone called him—she did so with a perceptible effort. She looked a different woman, less mischievous, much more serene.

"So you have been lucky enough to meet Nicole already. You haven't been here long, have you?"

John D. paused. It was his habit I found to reflect before he made a reply. "Only a week. My father sent me out to look into United Engineers. He is past air travel now. I met Nicole on my first evening. I have been in love with Siam ever since."

I strolled with John D. and Nicole to the paddock. There was my little chestnut pony looking as fresh and eager as ever. A miniature Arab with lovely lines.

We watched the race from the verandah. John D. had invested twenty ticals, Nicole five, and myself ten. Boon Kird got away nicely and lay third all the way to the final bend into the straight. Then he started to move up.

"He's going to win," said John D. "Sure thing."

But he wasn't. He took the lead a hundred yards from home, his ears pricked, confident, happy; his tail going in that peculiar circular movement that was characteristic of him. Then from out of the blue a grey pony came with a finish of great speed. He passed Boon Kird on the post. Or had he? Two minutes later our hopes were dashed. Samurai—belonging to a Mr. Tojo, number three, had won. Boon Kird was second.

"Well, that's the way it is. Mr. Tojo is a new Japanese owner. It will pay twenty to one. I wonder if he backed it?" Apparently he had for as we left the Club a party of Japanese, the victorious Mr. Tojo among them, were opening celebratory champagne.

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I asked John D. and Nicole to lunch with me on Sunday, and John D. said they'd love to. What day was that?

" Sunday the 8th. The 8th of December."

" Fine. We'll be with you before one."

That was the last day's racing that I enjoyed in the old Bangkok of before the war. We had another two days before my luncheon for John D. and Nicole, but the news was too ominous for me to enjoy even a most unexpected win by Sai Sunee.

Nicole and John D. arrived on Sunday just before one o'clock as they had promised, and my cook gave us his very best chicken curry with popadams, Bombay duck, and all the trimmings. We drank more than usual, I remember, to loosen the tension.

Nicole would not hear of the Japanese invading Siam. " They want us as friends," she said.

But John D. was not so sure. " They might invade and then you'd have to be friendly, wouldn't you? "

Nicole tossed her head. " The Thais will fight."

I did not ask either of them how their affair was progressing but from what they said I felt sure that this matter went deep. John D. was clearly very much in love with Nicole. They were as children together in their happiness and looked at each other for confidence and support whenever they were in doubt. John D. kissed Nicole when she slipped on my polished floor and laddered her stocking, and he did it so tenderly that I knew that these two loved each other deeply.

Towards the end of lunch the drinks we had taken had their effect and we laughed at many things over coffee and brandy. Nicole lit a small cigar and John D. protested, but she said, " He doesn't approve of women who smoke cigars. Why not? Danish ladies do, and Burmese."

" But not in my country," said John D.

" I shall introduce it there," said Nicole.

I should like to have known what John D. would have replied to that but I never did, for at that moment Kian came into the room. His usually cheerful face was ashen and he was trembling.

" Kian, what on earth's the matter? "

" The Japanese, master. They are here. They have come for you . . ."

John D. and I finished our brandies in a gulp. Nicole left hers and ran to John D., who put his arms around her. We could hear the tramp of heavy feet on the bare, teak stairs, and then they were in the room: an officer, quite young, his samurai sword clanking by his side, a sergeant, one of the ugliest men it has ever been my misfortune to set eyes on—he had an unseemly goitre that added horror to his misshapen powerful frame—and three soldiers. The Japanese were accompanied by a little Siamese interpreter. He seemed to be in fear of his life. Perhaps he was. Only the young officer, apparently, spoke English.

" You—" he pointed at me—"and you—" he pointed towards

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John D. "Get your passports." The sergeant fingered his revolver and the men brought in a sten gun to make sure that we did as we were told. I took my passport out of a drawer in my desk and handed it over.

"British?"

"Yes."

The young man turned to John D. "You?"

"American."

"Passport?"

"At my home."

"Never mind. You two come with us. Pack one case. Quick. Five minutes. Who she?"

He pointed to Nicole. John D. answered, "She is my friend. She is Siamese."

"Very nice, too. She can go."

Nicole said, "I want to be with Nai."

But the young Japanese replied, "Impossible. Find new Japanese boyfriend." And he laughed most unpleasantly.

John D. took Nicole in his arms and kissed her. "You must go now."

She was sobbing desperately, as if her heart would break. "But Nai, when shall we see one another?"

John D. thought a moment and then he smiled at her, "I don't know, but we will. It will come right in the end . . ." Those were the last words he spoke to her for at that moment, on orders from their sergeant, the soldiers pushed their sten gun into our ribs and we ran to pack our bags.

I gave a suitcase to John D. and threw into it pyjamas, a dressing-gown, and a brush and comb. I packed a bag myself. As I did so, through the open window I could see Nicole walking down the drive towards the roadway, her little figure still shaking with her sobs. I thought to myself, She may kill herself. She is so young and in love.

The little interpreter came in. "The officer says five minutes is up. You come now or he shoots you." He added, grotesquely, "Please come now."

"Right. But how did it happen? How did the Japanese get here without our having any warning?"

The interpreter looked at us in terror but he whispered, "They land at Bangpu at dawn. Tanks in city within an hour. Siamese Cabinet give in. All over. Japanese everywhere."

We walked out to a waiting jeep, the soldiers still pressing their sten gun into our backs. Passing the servants' quarters I noticed that they had all fled, all except Kian who had stood his ground. As I passed him, he handed me a parcel.

He spoke to me in his own language, "I pray for you, Nai."

They drove us through Chinatown towards the Grand Palace. Japanese troops swarmed the streets. They were hard, disciplined little men with their peaked caps and their guns at the ready, looking as if they were prepared to fight there and then. This

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was not a false impression. These troops fed off the country. They were as fit as goats and they had a fatalistic courage.

All the Chinese merchants had closed their shops. The Japanese flag was flying beside the Siamese tricolour.

The jeep wove its way past the Grand Palace through the narrow streets, past the Pramane Ground, where the Thai Kings are cremated, to the new University, the grandly named University of Moral and Political Science. We entered the gates. Japanese soldiers were putting up barbed wire. They were making a prison camp—for us.

The incredibly rapid pace of events had left us numbed and, perhaps, the brandy had kept the full impact from us. But that night we discovered exactly what our position was.

The fifteen hundred British and American civilians in Bangkok had been rounded up in a matter of hours and bundled into the Ta Prachan concentration camp. This consisted of one of the University buildings and some land, eighty yards long by fifty wide, surrounded by ten layers of barbed wire and, on one side, to the west, the Menam river. There was no barbed wire on the river bank, but three Japanese destroyers were anchored in mid-stream. Any prisoner seen to enter the water could easily be shot in the back by the guards, or shot in the water from the destroyer decks. The open bank was an invitation to death.

At the four corners of the camp there was a platform that supported two guards, a searchlight, and a bren gun. It looked as if we were going to stay here a long while . . .

Next morning, early, I remembered the parcel Kian had handed to me. I tore the string apart and opened it. It was very carefully packed, rolled up tightly in red tissue paper. At last I saw what it was: a golden image of the Buddha, some six inches in height and beautifully wrought. I realised that Kian had given me his most precious possession. I was deeply moved.

"John D.?"

"Yes."

"This may bring us luck. You never know. It was given to protect us. Perhaps it will . . ."

After the first two days Siamese guards replaced the Japanese in the camp. The Japanese had either seduced the Thai Government or bullied them into a partnership. We were enemy aliens.

At the end of the first week the Japanese made an inspection. We were counted, given numbers, and fingerprinted. All books were burnt. Even today this strikes me as horrific. The Japanese military, like the Nazis, had a great fear of the written word.

For nearly a month we had peace. We settled down. I got to know John D. very much better. He was a fine companion, humorous, stoical, not to be panicked. I liked his country very much more because in him I saw its best qualities. But our peace was rudely shattered on Friday, the 13th of January. The Japanese made a lightning dawn raid on the camp and within minutes a squad of soldiers were dragging two internees out

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through the gates, *by their feet.* This bestiality was meant to inspire terror, and it did so.

The two victims, we learnt, were Australians said to be making a primitive radio receiving-set in an effort to hear the Allied war news.

John D. and I, up early, saw the incident.

We had one friend among the Siamese guard, a Major Palip. It was the Major who told us of the three main torture chambers set up by the Japanese in the city, one at Sapatum Police Station, one at Japanese Military H.Q. in Sathorn Road, and the largest—and " best equipped "—at Saladaeng House not a quarter of a mile from where we had been arrested.

We asked the Major how the Japanese extracted confessions from prisoners they suspected and this was what he told us. " Usually elaborate torture apparatus is quite unnecessary. At Saladaeng House they have racks and thumb screws and boiling baths, but these are more to lower the morale of prisoners than for actual use. In practice, the Japs leave a prisoner to starve by himself for three days, then they beat him up. They beat him up at the same hour of the day or night every other day for as long as is necessary. So the prisoner, as well as the punishment, has long hours of fear and expectation. Each beating is a little fiercer than the last. A very bright light is kept on in all cells so that sleep is difficult. After a week of this a surprising number of prisoners are prepared to lick the Japanese boots.

" If the prisoner still has his courage, they strip him and burn him. Quite simply with a lighted cigarette or cigar or candle. Usually a few seconds of this is enough . . ."

John D. listened in fascinated horror. " Nice people, aren't they? "

The Major considered this, " Very *peculiar* people," he said. " Very peculiar indeed. Highly civilised, but also highly barbaric. Not people to trifle with."

In the first food parcel that John D. received was a tangmo, the great green melon of Siam with red flesh and black pips.

John D. gazed at the melon and examined it minutely. I asked him why.

" Well, she may have written to me."

And he was right. Privately we searched every inch of the surface and there it was—a section that had been cut out and reinserted with the greatest artistry.

With a penknife we prised out the cut square. At the bottom of the hole we could see the note. We extracted it. John D. read it to me, at least in part.

" *This is to send you my love and to say that I think of you always.*" She used the Siamese phrase, kidt teung—day and night. " *Do nothing rash. All will be well.*"

" Lucky man."

John D. looked up. His eyes were shining.

" Yes, I am."

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NICOLE was distraught by the calamity and swiftness of events. She had sent the note to John D. in anguish of spirit. She never doubted that, one day, they would be reunited, but she was not yet eighteen, and the Japanese were going to be the masters of Siam for many years, it seemed, perhaps for ever.

She stayed at home for fifteen days in her little attap-roofed house with its shining teak floors, and then, as her tears dried, she was bored, bored almost to death. She even bought herself from a chemist the poison that would induce a sleep that would not end, but she never ate it.

Something told her that this was not the end but the beginning of her story. She bathed and, naked, looked at herself in her long bevelled mirror. Was she not lovely? Her nose was not flat as are the noses of Siamese girls, but small and retroussé. Her eyes were her best point. They were meant to speak the language of love. And then her breasts had pink nipples. This delighted her. Siamese and even Chinese girls had dark nipples—Nicole shuddered as she stood there—but hers were the colour of a petunia and they were the climax of her breasts that were small but very full and firm.

She turned to the Buddha that sat in an alcove overlooking the door. A shaft of sunshine illuminated the face of the image. It smiled back at her, a message of encouragement. Idly she started to arrange her hair, to press her prasin, to choose a blouse.

That night, to the delight of Mr. Borge who very nimbly had become an "Indonesian protected person," Nicole signed on again at the Golden Palm.

The Golden Palm was allowed to remain open for both the Siamese and the Japanese military as well as the Kempei Thai, and the Siamese police liked the place. Foreigners avoided the Golden Palm now, except the Germans. The British and Americans were soon forgotten.

When Nicole returned to the Golden Palm, Mr. Borge greeted her in French, for English was a dangerous language and Mr. Borge was now an Indonesian who spoke fluent French. "Bienvenue, Nicole!"

She smiled, signed "The Girls' Book," and joined her friends among the dancing partners. She looked around. The place was unchanged. The boys still had their odd numeration, the two bar boys were hard at work, the band under Argot was late as ever. Even the little model of the Coronation coach of the King of England, which Prince Palim—that incurable Anglophile—had placed in the bar, was still there.

The boys still decorated the tables with kut chine and orchids. Elspeth, the enchanting little chanteuse, sang her songs of love. Yet there were changes.

Nai Samien, the Siamese Clerk, who always prided himself on his impeccable English, now spoke only in his own language or in a rather halting Japanese. Elspeth introduced a Japanese marching song into her repertoire. Ah Loke, the senatorial butler, bowed

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and hissed at newcomers in welcome in a manner that said unmistakably that he was a Co-Prosperity Sphere man; and Ah Fung, the cook, devised Japanese dishes.

It was not possible for a girl to work at the Golden Palm and not be infected with the Japanese atmosphere.

Nicole, at first, had her secret reservations. She was genuinely and deeply in love with John D., and in her heart she said that she was on the side of America and of the real Siam that was being kept out of sight.

Nicole made up her mind that, on no account, would she sleep with the new masters. They might have money but they were as ugly as sin. She would have to dance with them, smile at them, bow to them, flirt with them—a girl had to live—but love them or be loved by them she would not. It was very difficult.

For over a month Nicole managed to earn a very good living at the Golden Palm and to give nothing in return but the pleasure of her company and her skill as a dancing partner. It might have gone on like this had she not been lured into entering for the " Cordiality and Friendship " contest at the Lumpini Park Winter Fair. She was tempted because Mr. Borge said she should certainly enter.

" This year, Nicole, you can win the prize, which is five thousand ticals and a gold cup presented by His Excellency the Japanese Commander."

" Who," said Nicole, " is he? "

" You do not know? General Shiro Tanaka. He is no ordinary Japanese. He is very well connected. An aristocrat and, they say, a most charming man. Really, Nicole, there is no harm in it. Are you still thinking of your young American? Forget him, my dear. He is a number now, not a man. You must live, and you are so lovely that you must use your talents. I have promised Police Colonel Praser that you will enter. We will not mention that you work here. You are just a young Siamese lady."

Nicole, with mounting excitement, began to believe that, perhaps, the result had already been decided, that she would be the winner. But why? Was it possible that General Shiro Tanaka wanted her, and was staging this elaborate pantomime to obtain her?

With these speculations racing through her mind, Nicole took her place in the long row of girls as the curtain rose to reveal them to the audience. There were delighted cries from the crowd that included a great many Japanese and, in a box above and apart, the three Judges with General Tanaka in the centre.

General Tanaka was unusually tall for a Japanese. He was a little under six feet in height. His complexion was a pale olive. His face was long and finely drawn. His hands were beautiful, long, delicate, and meticulously manicured. He looked almost majestic in his uniform, for he had a quiet air of absolute authority. He had one feature that seemed to be at variance with his air of composure and serenity. His eyes had a hard, straight stare and

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they were hooded by his upper lids that seemed as if they were always just about to shield them from the light.

Nicole paraded with the others in bathing costumes; then, more sedately, in prasin and white blouse. Only towards the end of the ordeal did Nicole have time to watch the General closely. He never for a moment looked at her. He seemed to let his glance fall on each girl in turn, but not on Nicole.

They had to wait more than half an hour for the result. Then it came over the loudspeakers. First, the third prizewinner, then the runner-up, and finally, after a pause for dramatic effect, the name of the winner, Nangsao Nicole.

Nicole had won! She walked very slowly amid the cheering to the Judges' box. The Siamese General said a word of congratulation. Tanaka rose and held up the golden vase for the crowd to see. Then, without a word, he handed it to Nicole who weid deeply. As if it was an afterthought, he handed her the cheque for five thousand ticals. Then, for the only time, he smiled and shook her hand.

It was her day of triumph. She was handed a garland by an official and, smiling, she placed it on General Tanaka's shoulders. As she did so the press took their photographs. It never occurred to Nicole that one of these would come so swiftly into the hands of John D. . . .

An official car took her home and she was about to prepare her supper when she found the note written in Thai that someone had left under her door.

It was very short. It read, *Nangsao Nicole is invited to dine with General Tanaka at Sathorn House this evening at eight p.m.*

At first her instinct was to refuse. Then she realised that it was impossible for her to do so. It was a polite invitation, clearly from a superior, but still most polite. It would be bad-mannered to refuse. She ironed her blue-and-gold prasin and white lace blouse . . . At a minute to eight her sam law drew up at the main entrance of Sathorn House.

Two Japanese sentries standing one either side of the doorway saluted Nicole. A Chinese butler met her and ushered her into the long bay-windowed room that overlooked the lawn. The butler withdrew and Nicole was left alone. She was nervous. She wanted to smoke and knew she could not. The Japanese expected women to conform to a pattern of outward modesty.

Nicole sat on her brocade chair wondering if other guests would arrive. No one came for fifteen minutes.

Then the door at the far end of the room opened and Tanaka was walking towards her. For a moment she did not recognise him. He was not in uniform now, but in a loose blue silk robe that was held in place by a silk band at the waist. He wore no socks but blue Japanese slippers.

The General smiled. "You know no Japanese? And I very little Thai . . . It is unfortunate. We will have to talk in English. You can understand?"

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Nicole smiled. "I understand," she said.

Nicole saw things more clearly now. This was to be seduction in the Japanese manner, but she had not the slightest intention of being seduced. Just in time she could escape the net—and perhaps keep the General as a friend, a very useful friend in the new Japanned Siam.

General Tanaka and Nicole dined alone on the verandah, waited upon by two Chinese boys and the butler. The General had deftly chosen Japanese, Chinese, and Siamese dishes, and the butler, under the General's direction, served champagne. Tanaka did not ask Nicole what she would like to drink. He assumed that she liked good wine, and he was right. The first bottle was replaced by the second so quietly that Nicole, flushed and happy now, never noticed that she was drinking quickly.

Tanaka said, "You must learn a little Japanese; look, I will teach you a few simple words. First our Emperor. We call him *Tenno*. Can you say that, *Tenno*?"

"*Tenno*," said Nicole.

"Then, General. The word for General is *Taisho*."

"*Taisho—Taisho Shiro Tanaka*," said Nicole.

"Very good. When I want you to come to me I say, *Oide Nasai*. Come here."

"I will remember."

"And this meal we are eating—dinner—this is *Yushoku*."

"*Yushoku*—the evening meal."

"You learn quickly, Nicole."

"I have had to, General."

General Tanaka ignored this but helped himself to a cigar from the silver box the butler had placed before him. He did not ask Nicole if she smoked. So Nicole said, "May I have one of my own?" And she took one of her minute cigars from her case.

The General seemed taken aback. This was clearly un-Japanese. "Yes, yes, of course. Forgive me for not asking you."

The butler brought them liqueurs and coffee. In a few minutes Tanaka got up, saying, "Wait here." He slipped off his shoes and went into the large sitting-room. In the far corner, high on the wall, he had had a little shrine constructed. As far as Nicole could see, it was very simple and seemed to house some white rice paper, a miniature sword, and a small bevelled mirror. The General knelt and appeared to pray for several minutes. Then he got up and returned to Nicole.

Nicole felt that this was the moment to escape. She rose and held out her hand.

The General looked at her and his stare now held her eyes. "You wish to go?"

It was the moment of decision. If she said no, I can stay, she would, she knew, become the mistress of the most powerful man in Siam. But she should say yes, I must go.

The words that she did say were spontaneous, but irrevocable.

"As the *Taisho* wishes," said Nicole.

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Tanaka led her upstairs to his large bedroom and said, "Wait here for me."

Alone, Nicole undressed in front of the General's mirror. She stood there naked, looking at her reflection. Tanaka came back and carried her to his bed.

Nicole raised herself on her elbows, brought up her hands palm to palm and fingers outstretched to her forehead and asked Buddha to protect her. Then she turned to give herself to the man who had made her Miss Siam.

Nicole awoke early next morning, with a sinking heart. What was it she had done? She had become the mistress of a Japanese when her American lover was imprisoned by these very Japanese. It was a betrayal. It is done, it is done, she thought, but some time somehow I must do some service that will show that in my heart I love him still.

One has to live for the day, for the week. This is war, and I am living in it. How could I refuse him? She looked over to where the General lay, still asleep.

I thought that John D. would never recover from the shock that he received when he first saw that fatal photograph of Nicole smiling up at General Tanaka, placing a garland around his shoulders.

For weeks he kept up an angry smouldering silence and then, suddenly, he threw off his despair. "Know what, Gerald? I'm going to escape. I'm going home. I don't know how yet, but I'll find a way. This place stinks. The whole set-up, with these leprous little yellow bastards ruling the roost, is evil and unclean. I'm getting out . . ."

"It's impossible, John D. It can't be done. I've thought of every angle . . ." And for a time it seemed so insoluble that John D. and I dropped our talk of escape.

In fact, more than half the Commandant's office and the guards were secretly anti-Japanese. But this posed a new danger. If we spoke to them and they expressed sympathy, we could never tell if we were talking to a genuine friend or a hidden agent of the dreaded Kempei Thai, the Japanese Secret Police who seemed to be a law unto themselves, independent even of General Tanaka and the Army High Command.

But the real feelings of many influential Siamese became increasingly clear as the war progressed. Japan extended her Empire to the borders of India and Australia, but she did not penetrate either great domain. At the gates of India she was arrested, and almost at Australia, in Guinea, she was halted. There were signs that the tide of war was slowly turning. Italy had surrendered. It was the first good news we had had for over two years. The Siamese, who had become resigned to having Japanese masters more or less for ever, revived their hopes of eventual liberation. And they took some practical steps to start the long march back into Allied favour. They improved our conditions at

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Ta Prachan; and they allowed us to have visitors once a week.

Both John D. and I thought it extremely unlikely that anyone would trouble to visit us. We were quite sure that a Thai agent of the Kempei Thai would be making a complete note on those members of the public who were rash enough to visit " the Anglo-American monsters." But a visitor we did have. The card that was sent in by a guard was handed to me, but it had both my name and that of John D. inscribed on it.

It was the card of *Nangsao Nicole.*

John D. flatly refused to pass through the gate to the office where perhaps fifty men and women, some of them old servants of the internees, were waiting with parcels and presents.

I said, " If you don't come, I won't go."

John D. thought for a moment. " All right, I'll come, but I won't speak to her."

We went out together. Nicole was standing in a corner, a brown paper packet in her arms. I went over to speak to her. Her eyes searched for John D. and she made a movement to join him, but I stopped her. " He is very angry. He saw a photograph of you at the Winter Fair . . ."

" With Shiro? Nai, I can explain. Can't I speak to him? "

" He will only hurt you."

" Look. Take these. It's fruit and some cakes I have made."

John D. came over and said very quietly, " Come on, Gerald. She stinks of Japanese."

I do not think Nicole heard what he said, but she caught his tone and the colour drained from her face. She was shaking with tears as she left.

That evening we ate the mangosteen that Nicole had given us and the little Siamese cakes with icing sugar she had made for us. As John D. ate one, he spat something from his mouth.

He picked it up. " Gerald, it's a paper, a message."

It was in English, written very clearly but in a minute calligraphy so that the entire paper, which had been rolled into a ball, was no bigger than a raisin. John D. unfolded it.

" What does it say? "

" It says, *Contact Captain Lamart. N.*"

" *N* for Nicole? "

" I suppose so. Who is Captain Lamart? "

" He has just been appointed Deputy Commandant. I saw the notice on the board last night."

" I think it's a trap. She's a Jap informer now."

" Do you really think so? She may be Tanaka's mistress but—well, we don't know. Anyway we can contact Lamart without giving anything away, when he comes to inspect us."

It was in the week we had to wait that we first heard that a force known as the Seri Thai—the free Thai—had been formed in London and in the States and was said to be operating in Bangkok. We could not believe it. What Thai would risk torture in such a venture? But we became secretly excited as the inspection drew

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near. The two of us had a small room some six feet square now, and Captain Lamart, a burly jovial Siamese, entered it alone.

" It's very tidy."

" Yes. Captain, do you know the girl, Nicole, who used to work at the Golden Palm? "

Captain Lamart seemed to hesitate, " No. I don't think so." As he left he said, " Don't be too depressed, arrangements are being made." Then he turned on his heel and was gone.

We stood there in complete silence. John D. broke the strain by saying, " What did he mean? Arrangements are being made? "

" I have not the slightest idea—but it may be that you have been too hasty about Nicole."

We heard nothing from Captain Lamart for a month, and then his turn for inspection of living-quarters came round again. As soon as he entered our room he sat on a bed and said, " Listen attentively. The Seri Thai are now fully operative in Bangkok. Certain key personnel among the internees are to be smuggled back to the States and Britain. You—" he nodded to John D.— " are to be the first to go. Your father needs you in war-work that your firm is now engaged on. You have no choice. The list has been drawn up in Washington."

" But how do I get out of here? "

" You die. You are cremated. You will leave a will asking to be cremated. But you will not in fact die or be cremated."

" I am glad to hear that . . ."

" Thus your absence from the camp roll will be accounted for, and in three weeks' time, if the plan operates, you will be in New York." The Captain added with a smile, " I understand that the transport provided is one of your own submarines. Are you willing to take this chance? "

" When am I to die? "

" You will be taken ill with severe colic on Thursday. The camp doctor will give you a dose to simulate severe colic. You will be ' much worse ' on Saturday. You will ' die ' early on Sunday morning about four a.m. The camp authorities will respect your wish and your body will be carried in a coffin—it will have ventilation holes—to Wat Bencha for cremation next day. The coffin will be cremated. You will proceed to Satahip and thence to America in the hands of the Seri Thai."

" Can I see Nicole? "

" No, that will not be possible. This is war, my friend."

" Thank you, Captain, I understand my instructions. I will play my part."

On Sunday, as arranged, before dawn, John D. " died." A coffin, which had been prepared, was brought in. He was laid in it. John D. looked dead. No doubt his pulse was beating but Dr. Prachuab had taken the precaution of administering a very heavy sedative. I was suitably upset by the death of my friend. At ten o'clock the Padre who, I am sure, was not in on the plot, was called. John D.'s will was read. He had asked to be cremated.

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Later the strangest procession I have ever seen passed out of the camp gates, the sentries taking off their caps out of respect for the dead. I helped to carry the coffin to the waiting little hearse, pulled by two Thai ponies. The other bearers were the Padre, Dr. Prachuab, and a fellow American of John D.'s who had known his family. We placed the coffin on the hearse. The driver flicked his whip and drove off to the Temple. It was the last I saw of John D. for many months.

Immediately, a notice appeared on the camp board.

DEATH

It is regretted that John D. ——, a civilian internee and an American subject, died this morning at dawn from severe intestinal disease. At his own request he is to be cremated at Wat Bencha.

It was signed by the Deputy Commandant.

General Tanaka was suspicious of foreigners but he never doubted Nicole. After all, he had given her everything. Why should she not be loyal? It paid her to be. He had heard that she had had an American lover, but he had died in the camp—providentially—so there was no need to worry on that account.

Nevertheless as he began to confide more and more in Nicole he tested her in various ways. One method was to leave her alone for a day or so—and have her watched. On another occasion he took her with him to Saladaeng House when he paid his weekly visit to the torture chambers.

Later, Tanaka sent Nicole home in his jeep. She turned over in her mind what the real explanation of this horrible experience had been. Was he merely testing her reaction, or was he himself a sadist who liked to pervert? Perhaps both were true.

That evening Nicole dressed herself with particular care. *Yu-shoku* was laid as usual on the verandah. She even kept the General waiting to make her entry through the doors that led out of the sitting-room. She was dressed as a Japanese with her hair done up in an elaborate coiffure and held in place by a pearl pin. She knew she looked ravishing. She adopted the very small delicate paces of Japanese ladies walking. The General was reading a paper, his back to the light. She put her hand over his eyes and kissed him.

Then she turned over idly the paper he had been reading. The question he asked suddenly took her by surprise, " Do you know anything of the Seri Thai? "

" The Seri Thai? No. I have read that some Siamese are traitors. But I can't believe it."

She said it with complete conviction. The General caught the conviction in her tone.

" They are giving trouble. The whole Government here depends on the cooperation of the Siamese people. We are allies. There is no greater crime than to stab a friend in the back. You understand."

" Of course, Shiro."

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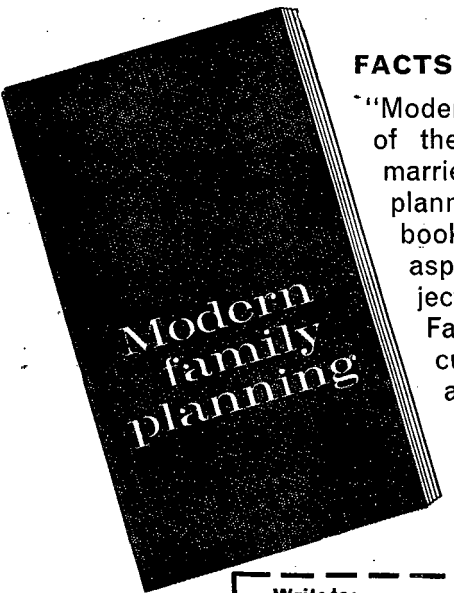

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The General's voice took on a bitter, menacing note. "Are your people turning against us, Nicole?"

"I know nothing of politics, Shiro. I know only how to please my lord."

Tanaka smiled. "Forgive me. I have worries. I have to speak to someone."

Nicole passed her hand over the General's mouth. "You can always speak to me, Shiro," she said.

Nicole did more than maintain her position as the General's mistress in Sathorn House. So adept was she at insinuating herself into Shiro's good graces, that he allowed her more and more to meet his friends, to sit by him when he ate, to dine with him at night, and even to be present at the official parties he gave from time to time to entertain his Thai allies, the Cabinet Ministers of the Pibul Government, and the Thai Army, Air Force, and Naval Commanders. Nicole became the centre of a web through which those who sought favours from General Tanaka had to pass. This was a position she enjoyed enormously and exploited fully.

It was amazing how the fortune of Nicole mounted. At first she did not realise the possibilities of her position. She thought that perhaps she would be able to bring in two or three thousand ticals a month—very useful for buying new dresses. But before long the sums and percentages offered her ran into hundreds of thousands of ticals or yen.

It was an intoxicating experience for a very young girl. She knew that she could keep Shiro excited and amused. As long as she could do that she was the hidden queen. As she realised her power her ambitions grew and she became arrogant. She asked Shiro for a car of her own, and he provided her with a white coupé and a driver. By the driver sat a bodyguard, a hulking Japanese ex-wrestler. Both men were dressed in white with gold cuffs and collars. Nicole's car which had no number plate was instantly recognised everywhere. She insisted on being driven very fast and no policeman dared stop her. She was intelligent enough to know that her whole character was being corrupted by absolute power, and by the money she made so easily.

She drank deliberately now to assuage the fears that haunted her, and to make herself amusing in love. She and Shiro shared a bottle of champagne at dinner but Nicole ordered the butler to bring her half a bottle to her room as she was dressing. This meant that she was very animated when she met Shiro at dinner; it meant that after seven at night she was never quite sober, though she was never drunk. The wine gave her a feeling of extraordinary relaxation and well-being. She felt that all the world was hers for the asking. Because she slept late and took good care of her complexion and had a first-rate masseuse, her looks were not affected. Indeed her beauty increased and was now more alive and imperious than it had been before.

Only sometimes, when she awoke at night after Shiro had loved her, did the doubts appear. At first they were not terrifying, but

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later her dreams were disturbed and she was frightened. By dawn the effect of the wine would have worn off and she would wake feeling that she was facing an unspoken terror. Why had she submitted so blindly to Shiro's will? Why had she accepted her life with him so easily? Was she becoming a sadist and a drunkard?

And John D.? What had become of him? Was he still alive? If he was, might he come back one day? And if he did, would he kill her for her treachery? Nicole thought all these things and was troubled in her heart, but the moments of despair were brief for always there was another day, with money to be made and Shiro to be kept intrigued, her ever-loving lord.

And then, imperceptibly at first but with growing momentum, the atmosphere of the city changed. No one could ignore the Seri Thai any more. Everyone knew that they were beginning to operate in Bangkok itself. They had friends in the highest places it was whispered . . .

Nicole read all the news very carefully. She felt in her inmost being a wild secret elation. The dream might be coming to an end, but it would be an end to the nightmares, too.

Shiro looked older now and some of his disdain and air of absolute command seemed to have deserted him. He prayed more than he had done of late, bowing low three times to the little wooden shrine and to a photograph of his Emperor placed beside it. Nicole had never loved him but now she came nearer than she had ever been to loving him.

It was at this point in her life that, unexpectedly, Nicole had the chance of redemption, accompanied by great danger. Her cousin, the Police Major Surit, stopped her as she was leaving the hairdresser.

He said, "We have work for you to do. You can help the Thai people. Will you do it?"

"I will do anything," said Nicole.

"Good. You will receive your instructions in due course."

Nicole hardly realised what she had done. She had agreed to become the agent of the Free Thai movement. She was needed because she had Shiro Tanaka under her spell. Shiro must never for one moment suspect her of treachery. If he did, Nicole did not doubt that he himself would order her to be tortured to extract a confession.

At breakfast one morning General Tanaka was more morose than usual.

"Nicole, do you know what they do at Saladaeng House to pretty young girls who are traitors? The Colonel has an acid. It is applied as a cosmetic is applied to the skin of the face, around the cheeks at first, then to the nose, and finally to the mouth. At first it is quite painless and the wretched little thing believes that nothing is happening to her, but it is, Nicole, it is . . ."

"It eats the flesh?"

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"No, it does not eat the flesh; not at first. It wrinkles the skin so that the young one starts to look old—very old. And it can stop there, if the young one is wise. But if she is obstinate then more is applied and the skin starts to suppurate and go rotten and, in the end, turns into a blotched mass that is hideous. It can be used on young men, too. But on young women its effect is—irresistible."

"Are you trying to frighten me, Shiro?"

"Only to warn you, Nicole. There is treachery in the air these days. The Seri Thai are multiplying. If the Siamese have turned into enemies, secret enemies, we will rend them asunder. The cries from the torture chambers will keep them awake at night. Oh yes, we can strike terror, Nicole."

"I do not doubt it, Shiro, but as long as I am with you I have nothing to fear."

The General thought a moment. "That is true. As long as you are faithful to Shiro you have nothing to fear and you will always be faithful to Shiro, will you not, Nicole?"

"Always, my lord."

Tanaka flew up-country that week—to see to the strengthening of the northern defences, it was said—and Nicole was the sole and undisputed mistress of Sathorn House while her master was away. She loved the feeling of solitude and security this gave her. Soon after she woke in the morning, between nine and ten, Nang Prik

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would crawl into the room to massage her. The old hag, whose teeth were discoloured by her betel chewing, was wrinkled and ugly, but she was one of the best masseuses in Siam, a mor nuet, or massage doctor, as the Siamese said.

On this particular morning Nang Prik had to wait longer than usual, but her mind was fully occupied for she had a message for Nicole. She did not know what the message meant; it was about love, no doubt, for the man who had given her the message, Major Surit, was young. It must be a very dangerous game he was playing, thought Nang Prik, for Nicole was the mea noi of the Japanese General. But even Nang Prik did not guess how dangerous the game really was.

At last Nicole woke and called her name. "Nang Prik, you lazy old whore. Come and start work at once." Nang Prik swept her betel and her snuff into her handkerchief, opened the door and, crawling on all fours, approached the bed.

Nicole turned over and lay naked on her stomach and Nang Prik started her routine. She might be old and even decrepit, but she had fingers of steel. She started with the little roll of flesh around the nape of the neck, pummelling it and pinching it until the blood started to flow less sluggishly, then her hands wandered down Nicole's spine in a rhythmic tattoo. She took each leg in turn, massaging each muscle with the dexterity that came from years of practice. After that Nang Prik paused a moment to get her breath, for it was very hard work. Then she took each toe firmly between her thumb and forefinger and gave it a brisk pull so that it cracked as the joint jumped. Sometimes she would pull but achieve no cracking. Then Nicole would swear at her, saying, "You are losing your cunning, Nang Prik. It is time you were thrown on the garbage heap."

But Nang Prik would only smile and say, "My lady knows that sometimes the toes won't come. If they are perverse, no cunning can persuade them."

"You would talk your way out of doomsday, Nang Prik. I pay you far too much."

Nang Prik did not dare charge Nicole. It was always "tam chai"—whatever your ladyship pleases. And Nicole was always apt to overpay for services rendered.

Nang Prik seized Nicole's right hand and each finger was subjected to the same sharp dislocation as the toes; then the left hand went through the same routine. Ten times the fingers and thumbs were pulled and ten times there was that faint, fascinating crack. Nang Prik smiled triumphantly.

At last it was all over and Nang Prik waited humbly for her reward. Then she remembered the message. In her fatigue she had very nearly forgotten to deliver it.

"Your ladyship, I have a message for you from Major Surit."

Nicole's mind was suddenly very alert. "A message?"

"The Major said that you should go to see the film, *Sons of Nippon*, at the Chalerm Kreung Cinema, and he said, 'Do not

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forget to give some satangs as you leave to the beggar at the door.' "

She did not need to ask for the message to be repeated. Every word of it was burnt into her brain.

Nicole had lunch at the Chinese restaurant in New Road, Swee Hong, where they served excellent Chinese, Japanese, and French dishes. The police on duty saluted as she came out and was driven to the Chalerm Kreung Cinema.

The manager was a Siamese, Mom Rachawongse, the son of a prince; he had been educated in Britain. Before the war he had been employed by one of the British firms, but now he had to take the work that offered itself, and the work that was available was this job of running the Chalerm Kreung Cinema. Not very suitable work, but work nevertheless, with a salary attached to it. He weid on seeing Nicole, handed her two tickets, refusing payment, and personally escorted her to the unoccupied Royal Box.

Sons of Nippon was a Japanese war film in the best tradition of the Tokyo studios. There was a hero—Pra Ek to the Siamese—a young officer of the Royal Japanese Air Force. There was a heroine—whom the Siamese called Nang Ek—and there was a background of majestic battleships, roaring combat planes, typhoons, mountainous seas with, overall, the great white flag of Japan with the blood red orb.

When it was all over, the young man was on his way to paradise, having died for his Emperor. The lovely young heroine was destined to rot away her life in seclusion. Through the captions, that came at the end, the audience saw the flags of America and Britain being hauled down and the flag of greater Nippon replacing them. Then a military march crashed out and the audience rose to stand at attention while the Siamese National Anthem was played.

Nicole walked out down the long broad steps to the street and, at the door, she paused. It was raining now and growing dark but she could see a beggar crouched over a little can he held in front of him for offerings. He was bent and appeared emaciated.

She dropped fifty satangs, in ten-satang pieces, into his lap and, as she did so, swiftly so that none could see, he handed her a minute piece of paper. She took it and put it in her bag.

She walked a few steps across the pavement to her waiting car. Her heart pounded for there was something about the beggar that seemed familiar. Peering back at him Nicole realised that, had he stood straight, he would be much taller than the average Siamese. His tallness was concealed by the prodigious, painful stoop. And then, on his right cheek, she saw the scar, and, instantly, she recognised it.

This wretched supplicating man in rags that stank, begging for alms as the cinema disgorged its patrons, was John D.

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★ ***The second (and last) part of "The Golden Orchid" by Gerald Sparrow appears in next month's Argosy***

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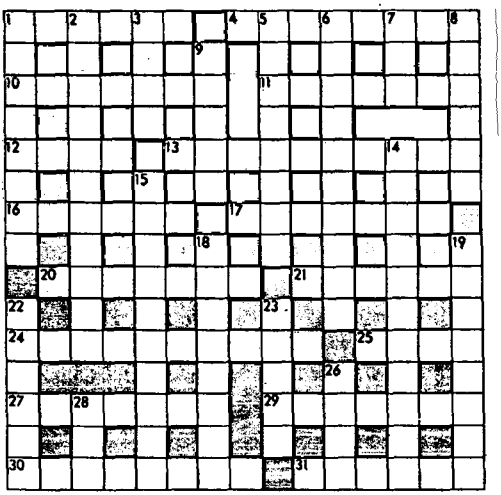
Solution on page 33



ACROSS

1 Father's attempt at baking (6).

4 Left article and went away with Andrew (8).

10 Early years in imagination (7).

11 Ring bell at counter—but be prepared to pay (4-3).

12 Unions appropriate three-quarters of food supply ! (4).

13 In cold, sprain may dislocate this (6, 4).

16 With nine, it helps to form diagnosis (6).

17 Occupants are some insects (7).

20 Boat built by three engineers (7).

21 Go out of your way to make this (6).

24 Light dresses? (3-7).

25 " Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of—" (*Macbeth*) (4).

27 I'll return in code to crash (7).

29 Take vehicle to river for revel (7).

30 Excessively prim and more than swinish (8).

31 Diminutive monastery dweller? (6).

DOWN

1 Panting, I come into the picture (8).

2 Fine for chocolates but no use for cup-ties (4, 7).

3 Part of torrent of abuse intended for the landlord (4).

5 His fiancée! (8).

6 Alternatives to starvation, they say (4-6).

7 Annoying on the green (3).

8 "The —— a bubble" (Bacon) (6).

9 Nymph would revel in this—so like her! (5).

14 Shooter's reason for being on marshes? Yes and no (3, 3, 1, 4).

15 Permanent night work—for film censors (4-6).

18 Stifles—parents mainly (8).

19 Rene comes up in grey and changes colour completely (8).

22 Safe seat for Humpty Dumpty? (6).

23 Don't parry, thrust! (5).

26 Three overthrow riot (4).

28 Leisurely start for a garland (3).

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